HEARTS AND CORONETS

ALICE WILSON FOX





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HEARTS AND CORONETS



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LONDON · BOMBAY · CALCUTTA
MELBOURNE

THE MACMILLAN CO. OF CANADA, LTD.
TORONTO

HEARTS AND CORONETS

A STORY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

BY

ALICE WILSON FOX

AUTHOR OF "THE GENERAL'S CHOICE," "DIANA'S DECISION," "A DANGEROUS INHERITANCE"

New York
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
1910

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Set up and electrotyped. Published August, 1910.

Norwood Press
J. S. Cushing Co. — Berwick & Smith Co.
Norwood, Mass., U.S.A.

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WITH GRATEFUL ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

FROM A. B. AND THE AUTHOR

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	NEW FRIENDS	1
II.	A STATELY HOME	14
III.	WINTER SPORTS	26
IV.	AN OLD FASHIONED CHRISTMAS	37
V.	A CONTRAST	52
VI.	DULL DAYS	62
VII.	BEREAVEMENT	74
VIII.	LETTERS	85
IX.	GRAND COMPANY	96
X.	A RESCUE	107
XI.	"A PASTORAL PLAY"	118
XII.	"A STARTLING DISCOVERY"	127
XIII.	PERPLEXITY	137
XIV.	COMING OF AGE	147
XV.	AN UNWELCOME INVITATION	160
XVI.	BRIXTON AGAIN	170
XVII.	MONICA'S WEDDING	181
XVIII.	OLD FRIENDS	192

CHAPTER		PAGE
XIX.	SEA-FISHING	202
XX.	A PICNIC	211
XXI.	ANOTHER FRIEND	222
XXII.	AT THE TOWERS	232
XXIII.	MOUNTAINEERING	243
XXIV.	A CONFESSION	258
XXV.	BANISHMENT	269
XXVI.	"A BOLT FROM THE BLUE"	278
XXVII.	CONSULTATION	287
XXVIII.	"DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE"	297
XXIX.	AN UNWILLING INHERITOR	311
XXX.	A GREAT CHANGE	322
XXXI.	FATE	331
XXXII.	"WEDDING BELLS"	341

HEARTS AND CORONETS

CHAPTER I

NEW FRIENDS

"You must therefore love me, myself, and not my circumstances, if we are to be real friends."

CICERO.

"I SAY, *look* at the snow."

"It looks pitch black," said Alison in an awe-struck tone, pressing her nose against the window pane of the oscillating railway carriage.

"By Jove, I believe we're off the rails," and the boy jumped up and sprang to the opposite window, trying to see into the darkness, as the carriage gave two or three tremendous bumps, shaking all the luggage in the racks down. As he crossed the floor, it leant over at an acute angle, bringing bags, rugs, sister, and new acquaintance, sliding in an indiscriminate heap on top of him.

A sort of thunderous rush was heard overhead, and a series of heavy thuds on the roof, under which the strongly built framework

quivered. Then a dim twilight filled the carriage, as if grey blinds had been pulled upwards from outside. One of the windows cracked, and bent inwards, and a small avalanche of snow fell in. The carriage then, with a sort of intelligent effort, partially righted itself, and stood still, while the children picked themselves up, and began to count their arms and legs. The faint light in the ceiling lamp went out, and grey darkness came in through the broken window, while a dead silence and absolute stillness succeeded to the noise and movement of the train.

"I say, there's an accident," exclaimed Audrey, with more truth than originality.

"What on earth's happened to the light?" said Alison.

"We're over the windows in a snowdrift," said Dick, excitedly. "I say, what a lark."

"I hope nobody's hurt," said Alison in a tone of concern. "And how are we to get out?"

"How silent it is," said Audrey. "I believe everybody else is killed."

"Rot," was Dick's rejoinder. "Listen, I hear voices, I simply can't get this beastly door open."

"Don't try," advised Alison, wisely. "You'll only fill us all up with snow. Somebody's sure to come along presently."

"Let's shout," suggested Audrey. And they raised their voices once and again, but the sounds seemed muffled and faint, and the snow hung outside the window, like a thick grey blanket.

"I say, we shall be wet if this snow keeps on coming in. Can't we possibly shut it out?" said Alison the sensible, laying a restraining hand on her brother's arm, as he was preparing to tunnel into the soft yielding mass.

"Don't, Dick, you'll only bring it in. It must be awfully deep. I wonder where we are."

"I'll tell you," he said suddenly. "We're in Marshmead cutting. The snow must have drifted in. I wonder why the air stays all right."

"Oh, snow is full of air," said Alison. "Don't you remember old Brewer's sheep?"

"What did they do?" enquired Audrey.

"They were snowed up for a week," explained Dick, "and lots of them were alive. He said they were in a great hollow cavern, with the roof all yellow with their breath, and where they had licked it. But they breathed all right."

"That's a good thing," said Audrey in a relieved voice. "I was beginning to wonder if we should suffocate first, or starve."

"Well, you do take a cheerful view of things," said Dick sardonically. "I shall know where to go when I want cheering up."

"I'll cheer you," said Audrey, knitting a pair of comical eyebrows, and looking serious. They afterwards found this was her way, and that her most paradoxical remarks were accompanied by an expression of solemnity that would have done credit to an owl.

But they were comparative strangers as yet, having only fraternised in the train, which was carrying Audrey from a loved school to an unloved home, and the two Dorincourt children back from a visit to an aunt, a few miles away, to their own place, close to where the accident had occurred.

For a few moments nobody said anything, then Dick remarked,

"I wonder if there is anybody next door. I'm going to knock the prisoners' code and see."

"Do you know it?" asked Audrey.

"Lor', yes, it's all in Gaboriau," he answered, beginning to tap.

But no response was elicited from either side, and they seemed to be completely isolated from the world.

"That's the worst of travelling first class," said Audrey. "Now a nice cheerful third would have been much more sociable."

"Aunt Honor thinks we ought to travel first on our own line," explained Alison apologetically. "She always makes us. But I think third's more amusing, myself, for a short way."

"I bar the babies," said Dick. "And it's jolly hard on the Company, the way everybody goes third now. Father's a Director, and he growls like anything about it."

"Miss Fenwick made me," said Audrey. "She thinks it's unsafe for so attractive a young person to travel third, unless accompanied by a maid."

Alison glanced at her, but not a twinkle disturbed Audrey's countenance, though Dick went off into a fit of laughter, recognising a kindred spirit.

"Awf'lly awkward, being so attractive?" he enquired.

"You try and see," returned Audrey gravely.

"What's the time?" enquired Alison. "My watch is slow."

"Mine's all right," said Dick. "I set it at Swindon. It's about four. I say, we were due in at 3.50. I wonder if the accident is known of by now."

"I'm afraid mother will be frightened," sighed Alison.

"Are there any more of you?" asked Audrey.

"Rather," said Dick. "There's Gerard, the eldest, an awful swell. Then there's Marjorie. She's out, and has lots of young men."

"Dick!" said Alison.

"And then there's Alison and me, and two more girls, what's their names, Alison?"

"Idiot," remarked Alison. "Honor, and Patricia, and Roger the youngest. Quite a lamb."

"What a jolly party," said Audrey, rather enviously. "Then it wouldn't matter so much."

"What wouldn't matter?" asked Alison.

"I only mean that your mother would have somebody to fall back upon, if you never got out."

"Jolly idea," said Dick. "But this is a bit dull, isn't it? Let's eat something, to keep us quiet."

"There isn't much left to eat," observed Alison. "Only some biscuits, and stale sandwiches. I kept them to give to the steam chuck."

"What's that?" enquired Audrey.

"Family name for the engine driver," replied Dick. "Don't know why, so don't ask me."

"I've got some chocolate," said Audrey. "And some milk if it isn't sour. I'm more cold than hungry, myself."

"I'm rather cold too," agreed Alison. "Let's do some Swedish exercises."

So they stamped up and down a little, and swung their arms, till the circulation was restored, when Dick again proposed some "grub."

"Better wait," said Alison. "We may want it more later."

"I've heard of people being snowed up for days," said Dick. "There! I got it out before you did. I say, you might tell us your name. I don't know how to talk to you."

"I haven't observed much difficulty," remarked Audrey. "But there's no mystery about me. My name's Audrey Denver. I'm an orphan, and I live with an uncle and aunt in Brixton."

"Oh!" said Alison, vaguely disappointed, she hardly knew why.

"We're not a bit interesting people," she went on. "At least the others aren't. There's Monica, and Laura, and Alfred. They're all grown up, and not particularly fond of me. All except poor Auntie, who has a horrid time with us all.

Uncle John's a chartered accountant. I go to school, thank goodness, and I love it, if it wasn't for the holidays."

"How funny that sounds," remarked Alison. "We all simply live for the holidays, at home."

"I suppose you have no end of a good time," said Audrey, rather wistfully.

"I should jolly well think so," said Dick, cheerfully. "We hunt and shoot these holidays, or skate and toboggan, and we have a ripping dance on Boxing Day. It's fancy dress this year. But in the summer we cricket and fish, and go picnics, and sleep out in the woods. And 'pon my word, I don't know which I like the best."

"It wouldn't amuse you if I told you how I spent my holidays," observed Audrey, "any more than it does me to do it. But term begins again on January 23rd, and that's something."

"Look here!" exclaimed Dick suddenly. "I really do believe I hear something at last. Wasn't that a shout? Hallo! Hallo!" he called. "This way."

The sound of picks and shovels was heard, and excited voices, and heavy footsteps over their heads, as apparently the roof of the carriage was cleared of snow. Then a pair of corduroy

legs appeared, kicking down along the window top, and Dick seized one and shook it heartily in his relief. The legs disappeared, and spades and pickaxes took their place, clearing away the snow from above, till the light of a lantern shone into the dark interior, and a red-faced man lowered himself to their level.

"Oh, Harding," cried Alison, "I am glad to see you. We thought we should be here all night."

"Why, it's Lady Alison, and Mr. Dick. Deary me, how pleased his lordship will be. He's here in a terrible taking about you surely. Are you all right, m'lady?"

"Rather," said Dick. "Only jolly hungry. Tell him we're here, will you. At least let me out. I'll tell him."

"Best wait till we've cleared the door, sir. You'll get wet through," said Harding.

But needless to say Dick paid no heed, but struggled through the broken pane, and upwards, till his legs also disappeared from view.

The girls only had a few moments more to wait, for scores of willing workers soon cleared a passage to the door, and a lean brown man in a fur coat had Alison in his arms, half laughing and half crying, for the strain had been more than she had quite realised.

Audrey stood back, a little embarrassed and lonely, but Alison quickly disengaged herself, and turning to her, took her hand and said simply,

"Father, this is Miss Audrey Denver. Audrey, this is my father, Lord Heversham."

Audrey shook hands rather shyly, but looked up frankly when he said in a kind voice,

"Were you going much further, Miss Denver?"

"Only to London," she said. "I suppose there is a train on."

"I'm afraid not," he replied. "The line is completely blocked, and there are two more trains waiting behind this one. I'm afraid you can't get on tonight."

"Oh, dear," she exclaimed. "Can I telegraph?"

"I believe the lines are down. But we may be able to telephone from home," he replied.

"She must come home with us, mustn't she, Dad," said Alison, and Dick, running up, covered with snow, and scarlet with digging, so heartily backed the invitation, that Audrey soon found herself in a big comfortable motor, with a hot water tin, and a fur rug, having shown her luggage to a fine footman, the guard's van having been excavated.

"Lucky you broke down so near the level crossing," said Lord Heversham. "The snow must be many feet deep on the fields."

"Is mother anxious?" asked Alison.

"Well, we will put her mind at rest in a very few minutes now," replied her father. "We had sent the motor to meet you, and it came back to tell us that the train was snowed up in Marshmead cutting, and so I came down in it, and brought it round here. Fortunately it's so near the town that nobody else is stranded."

"Clever of us to get snowed up so near home," observed Dick. "I shall be glad of my dinner, I know that."

Presently the motor turned in at a grand entrance gate, with heraldic beasts on the posts. There was a clear moon, shining on the snow, and Audrey observed a wide and beautiful prospect of undulating park, with glimpses of a distant lake, and many fine trees, bare and leafless now. The motor swept noiselessly round a broad curve, and drew up before a wide flight of steps. A brilliantly lighted hall, with double doors hospitably open, almost dazzled Audrey's eyes, and she was dimly conscious of a beautiful and gracious lady, in black velvet, with sparks of fire

in her hair, who took her cold hand, and drew her towards a blazing fire of huge logs.

There seemed a bewildering crowd of children jumping round everybody, and a perfect babel of voices, as the accident was discussed and explained from every point of view.

Then Lady Heversham led the way upstairs to a cosy bedroom, with another bright fire, lighting up the warm red carpet and chintz-covered furniture. A cheerful looking young maid was already unpacking Audrey's box, and Alison came in, full of hospitality, to explain that she lived next door, and that Audrey was in the girls' spare room, always kept for her special visitors.

Audrey, though rather abashed by the unexpected splendour of her surroundings, was not shy, and there was something about the simple friendliness and well-bred ease of her new friends which gave her a feeling of welcome, such as she had never felt in her uncle's shabby villa in Brixton.

Luckily Audrey had a good school outfit, and was in the habit of dressing for dinner at Miss Fenwick's, so the maid laid out a pretty blue muslin, with accompanying hair ribbons, and Audrey dressed, feeling that she was equal to the

occasion, though, to do her justice, it would not have troubled her unduly if it had not been so. She was given to taking life with philosophy, a gift which had been often useful to her.

As the big gong roared its summons to dinner, Alison, in a fresh white muslin, came in to escort her downstairs, and the two girls passed down the wide slippery oak staircase, Alison stepping confidently with the ease of long habit, and Audrey more cautiously, with one hand on the carved balustrade.

CHAPTER II

A STATELY HOME

"Though few the days, the happy evenings few,
So warm with heart, so rich with mind they flew,
That my full heart forgot its wish to roam
And rested there as in a dream at home."

THOMAS MOORE.

AUDREY felt a sudden access of shyness as a magnificent footman threw open the folding doors, and a blaze of light greeted them, with apparently half the inhabitants of the globe assembled to look at them.

They were not the last down, so she slipped into a chair, and tried to make out who everybody was.

Lord Heversham she knew, and standing on the hearthrug was a younger edition of him, who was evidently "Gerard."

Taller, slighter, and younger, he had his father's keen hawk-like profile, and sunburnt complexion, with a half sad, half merry look in

his dark grey eyes that arrested her attention. He looked "nice," she thought.

Next she saw Dick, his crisp red curls still splashed with water, and his white tie under his left ear. Then a lovely vision caught her eye, a radiant damsel in shimmering satin and pearls, with a small proud head and golden brown eyes shaded with long dark lashes.

The perfection of her grace and beauty made Audrey feel like a raw little schoolgirl, and profoundly conscious of her short skirts and washed muslin frock.

Two little pale-faced maidens, with long fair hair flying loose, were clinging round Alison, who had subsided on to the big white hearthrug, and just then Lady Heversham came hurriedly in, fastening her bracelet, with a word of apology to the assembled family.

Lord Heversham glanced round, and saying "Are we all here? Gerard, you must take in Miss Denver," slipped his arm into his wife's, and led the way, followed by Gerard and his partner with more decorum, and "at their heels, a motley rout."

"We are only a family party here tonight," he said pleasantly to Audrey, "so you must excuse our shocking manners."

She murmured something, and tried to feel cool and ordinary. But the great splendid hall, with the banners, torn and faded, hanging from the walls, the musicians' gallery, the carved ceiling, the marble pillars, and the imposing row of men servants drawn up in line, rather took her breath away.

Gerard, however, continued to converse agreeably and continuously. "We have got quite a long walk," he said, "so you needn't bother to think of a remark yet. We are going through the banqueting hall, till we reach the cedar parlour, where we always dine when we are alone. Charles II. always used to play cards there when he was here. Before my time."

"Charles II." she repeated with interest.

"Ah, you've heard of him. What a thing this modern education is. Pity he couldn't keep his head, wasn't it? Dear me, he did, did he? You see it's some years since I was at school. Here we are, and there's my father beckoning to you to come next to him. You needn't be alarmed, he's quiet with strangers. I've hardly ever known him bite."

Audrey's smile had not faded as she took her place, and Lord Heversham glanced at her again. He saw a thin unformed schoolgirl, with a bright

intelligent countenance, a graceful turn of the head and neck, and something familiar in her expression, which caught his attention, he hardly knew why.

He entered into conversation with her, as if she were one of his own girls, and Audrey found herself at her ease with him at once.

"I sent off the telephone message for you," he said. "I explained that the train had been stopped by the snow, and that you were quite well, and staying with us. I hope your people won't be anxious about you."

"Oh no, I'm sure they won't be," she said. "They're not particularly fond of me, I think. But I didn't want Aunt Edwina to worry. She isn't very strong, and things fret her."

She paused, and then added shyly. "It is most awfully good of you to take me in like this. I don't quite know what I should have done. I hadn't enough money to go to a hotel."

"Only too delighted," he said courteously, "to be of any use to you. So glad the children happened to meet you. But tell me, who are your people? You remind me so much of somebody, I can't tell who."

Audrey repeated the information she had

already given in the train, but he could make nothing of it.

"Your uncle's name is John Baxter," he said, "and his wife's sister married your father, Hugh Denver, who died before you were born, and then your mother brought you to live with her people. Strange, how familiar your face seems. One of those puzzling recollections that elude one. Never mind. Do you feel any the worse for your adventure?"

Audrey assured him that all was well with her, and addressed herself to a very delicious oyster patty.

Presently her other neighbour spoke again, in the melancholy tone that seemed habitual to him.

"Aren't you going to ask me if I've seen the Academy?" he enquired.

"Why no," said Audrey. "In December?"

"Oh dear!" he said. "If you're only going to talk sense, I'm afraid we shall soon come to an end of our conversation. But I suppose you are too young to do anything else. But we never do here in the holidays, even the youngest of us. It's the family rule."

"But I don't belong to the family," Audrey retorted, "so I can talk sense if I like."

"How true, how clever," he murmured. "Won't you have some saddle of mutton. I'm afraid Hawkins' arm must ache with offering it."

"I'm so sorry," said Audrey. "But I don't think I can eat any more."

"Then talk to me while I eat," he said. "I think people ought to take alternate courses, don't you? While I was having soup, you could converse on social topics. As you trifled with the salmon, I might cautiously venture upon sport, and ascertain your views. Then with the entrée, you might begin on politics. I should of course plunge into Tariff Reform with the meat, and discuss the question of free food. Then you might take a turn at flying machines while the sweets went round, and I could gracefully wind up with—I don't know what on earth we've got left to talk about."

"Our noble selves, perhaps," suggested Audrey laughing. She felt quite at home with this foolish young man, and had forgotten her alarm.

"Quite so," he said. "Let's begin at once. Now what was it that frightened you the most when you came in this evening. Your eyes were like saucers. Now they're more like — eyes."

"I think that great tall footman," said Audrey confidentially. "And the white hearthrug."

"He shall receive a month's notice," Gerard assured her, "and the hearthrug shall be dyed green. So you were not frightened at any of us. Pat is considered rather an alarming person. I'm a bit shy of her myself. But women are much braver than men, I am assured by my dentist."

"Which is Pat?" said Audrey, looking round the table.

"Oh she doesn't dine down. She and Honor are herded off to bed at 8.30. She is the smallest of the two kids, with the most turned-up nose."

"Isn't there another little one?" said Audrey. "I thought your sister said you were seven."

"I think I won't tell you tonight," he answered. "Tomorrow, after a good sleep, you may be more equal to the calculation. Dear me, there's my mother trying to catch your eye. We'll talk about me when next we meet. Au revoir."

When the ladies found themselves in the drawing-room Alison tucked Audrey's arm in her own, and led her up to the radiant vision in white. "Marjorie," she said, "you haven't had a word with Audrey yet. She'll think you're afraid of her!"

Lady Marjorie smilingly made room for Audrey

beside her, and she bashfully sat down. She felt a sort of adoration growing up in her heart for this sweet and gracious young girl, and ventured to touch a fold of the white satin gown with a hesitating finger, longing to think of something really clever and charming to say, but remaining tongue-tied.

"I saw you getting on like anything at dinner with Gerard," Marjorie said. "What a chatter-box he is. I expect you are quite tired."

"I didn't talk much," replied Audrey. "He did it all, and I only laughed."

"He is 'a little bit off the top,' as Dick says, sometimes," observed Marjorie. "But we all do it, the first night of the holidays."

"This isn't really the first night," put in Alison. "Dick left Eton three days ago, but he had to go to Aunt Honor's, and I had to meet him there, so we only got back to-night."

"Tell me how you got on there," said Marjorie, unfurling a big white feather fan between her lovely face and the leaping wood fire. Audrey, watching her, felt her pulses beat with the sudden strong infatuation of the imaginative young girl, so often inspired by an older woman. She sighed for pure pleasure, and stroked the satin fold, as the sisters talked together.

"Comfy?" asked Marjorie, and Alison pushed a soft silk cushion behind her guest's shoulders.

"I should think so," said Audrey. "I should think Heaven must be something like this. Why are you all so awfully kind to me?"

There was a sudden intensity of feeling in her voice, which touched the elder girl. It was the tone of one to whom happiness was a surprise, a sad inflection in a child's voice, and Marjorie seemed to understand.

She patted the thin brown hand that caressed her dress, and said softly,

"I think it is because we are all so happy ourselves, it comes natural to wish everybody else to be so too. And you are a dear child, you know."

Audrey might have resented the imputation of childishness from anybody else, but Marjorie could do no wrong. To her immense vexation tears started to her eyes, but she bit her lips and said cheerfully,

"Well, I must make the most of it, for I suppose I must go home tomorrow, if the line is clear. Oh dear," and she ended with an irrepressible sigh.

"I don't see why you need go tomorrow," said Marjorie. "If your uncle and aunt have

all their own children, and if they wouldn't mind your staying on here, why shouldn't you?"

Audrey gave a gasp. "Do you really think I could stay on," she said. "It would be simply too glorious."

"I'll ask Mother," said Alison. "Anyhow, Father thought the line would take twenty-four hours to clear, and it's snowing again like anything now. Oh you'd much better stay and spend Christmas with us. Christmas in London is never the same thing."

"But have you room for me?" enquired Audrey.

"My dear, I believe there are seventy bedrooms here," said Marjorie, laughing. "I don't know how many you like, but it's not easy to get overcrowded."

"Seventy bedrooms!" repeated Audrey. Her capacity for astonishment was nearly exhausted.

"Why, however many housemaids do you want?"

"I don't exactly know," said Marjorie. "Do you know, Alison?"

"Eighteen, I think," said Alison. "Mrs. Carpenter says it isn't enough to keep the place decent."

"Oh, Mrs. Carpenter always grumbles," said Marjorie. But I ask her if she's heard lately from her sailor son, and then she forgets all her tantrums, and becomes quite sweet. Mother always sends me to talk to her now."

"By the way," Alison said suddenly, "what will you do for a fancy dress, Audrey. Have you got anything?"

Audrey shook her head, and Marjorie said, "We'll hunt out the dressing-up box, and find her something. I believe I know the very thing."

"Here come the boys," said Alison. "I'll go and catch Mother, and arrange it." And off she went, leaving Audrey in a sort of maze of happiness.

She looked round the beautiful room. The walls were panelled with white wood, and carved with wreaths and festoons of flowers and fruit in high relief. The electric lights were covered with white silk shades, and a few exquisite water-colours hung here and there. The soft green pile carpet, the delicate flowered chintzes, the big vases of russet and gold chrysanthemums, the grand piano standing invitingly open, the group of animated, graceful young people clustered near the fire, made the most complete

contrast to her aunt's pretentious drawing-room in Myrtle Road, Brixton.

Audrey closed her eyes and recalled its staring gold and drab wallpaper, the green rep curtains and chairs with red woolly antimacassars in winter, and coarse imitation lace in summer. The crudely coloured oilcloth on the floor with a few cheap Japanese mats on it. The vases of dried grasses dyed in vivid colours, on the brown marble mantelpiece, the stained glass in the upper panels of the windows, the marble and gold clock. The fusty smell of stale tobacco and seldom opened windows, the soiled lace curtains, the general atmosphere of tasteless discomfort, rose before her so clearly, that she shuddered and put out her hand to assure herself by the sense of touch that she was not dreaming.

Then Alison came back with a bright face and Lady Heversham's invitation, and Audrey felt that earth could hold no higher bliss for her.

Then Dick appeared to make them all join in a round game, which lasted till his mother, declaring the travellers needed a good night, sent them all off to bed.

CHAPTER III

WINTER SPORTS

"With feathery wreaths the forest is bound,
And the hills are with glittering diadems crowned.
'Tis the fairest scene we can have below,
Sing welcome, then, to the drifting snow."

ELIZA COOK.

THE next day was Christmas Eve. When Audrey came down she found the great house hung with wreaths of evergreens, and full of the cheerful bustle of preparation.

Alison took her into the schoolroom after breakfast, and she joined the two little girls in making the decorations for the pulpit, which were to be taken down to the church later on. As her quick fingers twined the holly and ivy together, she listened to the merry, informal talk round her with a feeling that she had never truly been at home before.

Marjorie and Alison were busy tying up muslin bags of sweets with bright ribbon for

the tenants' Christmas tree, and their talk was mostly of parish matters, their personal acquaintance with all the labourers and workmen on the place seeming to be exhaustive. Presently Audrey asked how many were invited, and was told about three hundred.

"How can you remember them all so well?" she said. "I am sure I should forget half the names."

"Ah, but you see we have known them for about fifteen years now," said Alison, "and all the boys go to Marjorie's Bible class, and I have the girls, and the rabbits have the babies."

"*Who* have the babies?" enquired Audrey.

"Oh, Honor and Pat are the rabbits," explained Alison, "and we take turns to give out the library books, and Father makes our boys go down to the club, and they play cricket and football altogether, so of course we know them all awfully well."

"I see," said Audrey. "But why did you say fifteen years? Haven't you always lived here?"

"No," said Marjorie. "Father succeeded rather unexpectedly. I remember quite well coming here, and how big it all seemed, and how small I felt."

"I was only a baby," said Alison, "and Dick and the rabbits and Roger weren't born."

"I've often thought it would be very jolly to be called 'my lady,'" remarked Audrey. "I used even to dream about it, and wake up so disappointed to be only a plain Miss. Do you know it was an awful shock to me to find out who you all were. Dick and Alison hadn't given me the slightest warning. I don't believe I've ever spoken to anybody with a title, in my life, and here you all are, as common as blackberries."

"I did enjoy it at first," said Marjorie. "I was about six, and I remember slapping my nurse, because she kept forgetting, and calling me Miss Marjorie. At last she said, 'Fie, fie, Ladyships don't slap,' and it came to me with quite a new idea. But all these young ones were born in the purple, so to speak, and I believe they thought everybody else was spoken to in the same way. It just came in time to enter Gerard for Eton, instead of a smaller school. But we weren't quite sure for a long time, you see."

"Why was that?" asked Audrey, interested.

"Well," said Marjorie, rather slowly, "I suppose there's no secret about it now. But there was a sad family trouble. My father was

the nephew of the last Lord Heversham, who had a much younger brother, a half brother, who would have come in first, as Father was only the son of a still younger sister. But there was some dreadful quarrel between the brothers, over a girl they both wanted to marry, I believe, and poor Uncle Hugh struck Uncle Heversham, and nearly killed him."

"How dreadful," exclaimed Audrey.

"Yes, and we think he believed he had killed him, for he disappeared on that day, and ran away, nobody knew where to. Then we heard he was dead, abroad somewhere, just after Uncle Heversham had died, and then my grandmother succeeded, and only lived a few months, and then my father."

"How can a lady succeed to a peerage?" enquired Audrey with puzzled eyebrows.

"Some of the older peerages go in the female line," said Marjorie. "Ours does, but of course the boys come first, and their children."

"I never knew that," said Audrey. "I'm learning all sorts of things."

"Everybody tried to find Uncle Hugh for ever so long, and Father never felt quite happy about it, but his death seemed quite certain, and as he had not left any son or daughter to

succeed him, and so long a time has gone past now, we are quite settled down."

"Why wasn't he happy?" asked Audrey.

"Well, he wasn't sure the report of his death was well authenticated. He was found lying desperately ill, and quite delirious, in a cottage somewhere in Canada, I believe. The people there didn't know anything about him, or who he was. He had been brought in badly crushed from some rocks having fallen upon him. Some other Englishman was out there, and helped to nurse him. He kept on calling out about Dorincourt in his delirium, and at last had a sort of lucid interval. This Englishman asked him his name, and he said 'Hugh Dorincourt,' and gave this address to write to. When he was dead they found a letter addressed to Lady Heversham, and sent it home. It had his photo and the girl's in it. So it must have been him. Poor Uncle Hugh."

There was a little silence. Audrey was turning over the sad story in her mind, and nobody spoke for a few moments.

Then a sudden diversion was caused by the bustling entrance of Orpheus, an extremely doubtful Aberdeen with white spats, who owned Gerard, and bestowed on him a slavish devotion.

He spent the greater part of his life apologising for his existence, and getting under people's feet. He was of a conversational habit, and was shrewdly suspected not to have as low an opinion of himself as his servile manners indicated.

He was followed by his master, who strayed in casually, emptied a bag of sweets, tied the two little sisters' fair manes together, and seated himself on a corner of the table, where Audrey was busy wreath making.

"I like to see the young engaged in works of charity," he observed. "But I am told that the snow is fit for tobogganing down the long field, and though of course you would rather provide nourishment for the poor, or becoming decorations for Mr. Whatshisname's pulpit, I thought it would be good for you to sacrifice your inclinations upon the altar of sisterly duty."

"But why are you at home, you silly boy?" said Marjorie.

"Because the snow is six feet deep in places, and the motor has struck. My aeroplane is out of order, and so I had to come up here. What's the matter, rabbits? Why do you wear your hair so? Is that the latest? I should have thought it awkward to carry your sister attached to your pigtail, but tastes differ."

"Oh Gerard, don't be a plague. Do let us go and get our snowboots on. I'll pay you out some day," said Pat.

"When my hair's grown long enough, I suppose. Oh thank you, Miss Denver. I'm sorry my little sisters should give you so much trouble."

The two little girls ran off, and Marjorie, shaking the loose scraps of silk and muslin from her skirt, rose and said,

"Couldn't we rig up a sleigh, Gerard? There hasn't been such a chance for years."

"I've been interviewing Wright on that subject," he said. "The old chap said bitterly, 'I dessay her ladyship would let you have the yellow barouche, or his Lordship's phaeton taken off the wheels. It's little use they'll ever be again, with these — motors.'"

"Poor old Wright," said Alison. "But what did you do about it?"

"I found a capital fourwheeled early Victorian kind of pony carriage, and had it sent down to the blacksmith's to get runners put on. I suppose by then the snow will have vanished. But it will keep him out of mischief for a bit. But why do you stand chattering here. If you three are coming, you'd better get ready."

Audrey had to borrow woollen gloves and to put a pair of Dick's shooting stockings over her boots, for her Brixton experiences had not included this sport.

As she and Alison ran over the frozen snow, sparkling in the clear winter sunshine, she looked back at the stately old house, standing against a background of solemn fir trees.

It reflected the sunlight from a hundred windows, and with the wide vistas of the park stretching away on every side, the smoke rising from its twisted chimneys, suggestive of warm hearts within it bore a general aspect of decorous luxury and peaceful comfort, which, oddly enough, sent a little pang through Audrey's heart.

"All this is theirs, and what have they done to deserve it? Why should some people have such beautiful lives, and others such ugly sordid ones?"

Ah, Audrey, that old, old question, never to be answered till the day breaks and the shadows flee away.

But all discontented imaginings fled when they came in sight of the toboggan slide.

A merry group stood at the summit, among them Dick in his glory, and little Roger

following him like a shadow, on sturdy six year old legs, encased in warm gaiters, and clad in a thick reefer coat and red Tam o' Shanter cap.

He was a jolly little boy, round faced, curly haired, and roguish.

He pulled off his cap at a hint from Dick, and came forward with a rosy upturned face to greet the stranger.

"What good manners they all have," she thought. "What a perfect lamb. I should love to kiss him. But I suppose he would hate it."

Then the toboggan flew off, with Dick upside down upon it and a shrieking rabbit at each end, and ended a somewhat delirious course by a magnificent plunge into a snowdrift, to the joy of the audience.

Then another group appeared tugging a second toboggan behind them, to be greeted with shouts of welcome.

"The Adairs, oh first rate, now we've got two," said Alison, and a tall boy, and two girls in blue serge and blue cowboy hats, were introduced as Harold, Lilian, and Sybil Adair.

"Oh my! we're hot," said Harold. "It's no joke pulling a beastly toboggan over the snow for two miles. But this is the only decent

course in the country, and we thought you would let us leave it here."

So Audrey was quickly initiated, and the time flew by, until servants appeared with hampers, from which issued hot pasties, baked potatoes, and roasted apples, with mulled drinks in Thermos flasks, and the party devoured an *al fresco* lunch.

"Such a pity to waste time by going in to feed," was the universal opinion.

But the brightness of the day was soon past, and the little ones tired, so the happy company trooped back to the castle, ready for tea, and glowing with health and exercise.

A tall, grave young man had appeared, who seemed to be unable to keep his eyes from Marjorie, and was hailed with cries of "Robin, Robin Adair." Audrey recognised him as one of the many adorers, so disrespectfully referred to by Dick in the train. "And who can wonder?" she thought in her enthusiasm. Marjorie, in her sable cap and coat, with a bunch of fresh violets tucked in front, her fair face flushed, and her eyes sparkling, was indeed pretty enough to turn any young man's head.

Alison looked very bonny in her neat brown coat and skirt, the same material as Marjorie's,

only minus the sables, and with a red cap, like little Roger's. But her round honest face, and steady eyes, could lay no claim to her sister's beauty. Gerard had gone in earlier, "to do sums," as he said, and Dick and Harold were deep in talk. Audrey watched them all with a kind of wistful admiration, and though half envious, was able to rejoice generously in their bright unconscious happiness, and joy in life, which should belong to all young things.

CHAPTER IV

AN OLD FASHIONED CHRISTMAS

"The mistletoe hung in the castle hall
And the holly branch shone on the old oak wall."

HAYNES BAYLEY.

MEANWHILE Lord and Lady Heversham were enjoying an unaccustomed *tête-à-tête* in the untidy room known as "His Lordship's den," where everything was shabby, old fashioned, and comfortable, and the scent of tobacco rested like a benison in the air.

"That's a nice little girl the children have picked up," he said, knocking the ashes off his cigarette.

"Yes, luckily," she said. "It is rather risky making chance acquaintances, but we couldn't have prevented it. I think her a very well mannered child, and it is rather wonderful, considering her own account of her people."

"She goes to a first rate school, I understand, and does it credit, I should say," said he.

"She has a well-bred look," continued his wife, "and Marjorie tells me has nice ideas and principles. She behaved well when she was suddenly cast in among us all without warning. It must have been something of an ordeal, poor child."

"Well, she is quite at home with us all now," said Lord Heversham. "Look at them all coming up the drive. I see the young Adairs are with them, and of course our friend Robin."

"Poor Robin," she said, half smiling. "I hope he won't burn his fingers too severely."

"Well, he isn't the first, and it never hurts a young fellow to fall in love with a good girl. But our Marjorie is a sad heart breaker, for all her goodness."

Just then Dick's red head appeared at the door, saying,

"Mother, we want to have schoolroom tea all together. Do you mind?"

"Delighted to be rid of you," replied his father. "Mother and I will have a holiday."

So a most riotous party sat down to a hearty meal in the big schoolroom, where Dick said he could eat twice as much as in the hall.

Audrey found herself between Gerard and little Roger, and was well pleased. The motherly instinct was strong in her, and she saw that the small boy had the most tempting cakes within his reach, and did not drop too much jam on to the tablecloth, without appearing to interfere unduly with his liberty of action.

Presently Gerard said in his depressed way, "Do you admire blackberry jam worn in a streak across the chin?"

"I shouldn't venture to remove it," she answered smiling. "He is much too independent. Time enough when he gets back to the nursery."

"And probably gets a slap from his nurse for it. I think such kindness is only disguised cruelty. Are you always so careful of people's susceptibilities?"

"I'm never always anything," she retorted.

Gerard clasped his brow. "Wait a moment," he said. "Let me think. What is the exact meaning of that sentence?"

"If you don't understand," she said, "it would be waste of time trying to teach you."

"It seems to me to contain the germ of a great truth," he said. "Crudely and awkwardly expressed, as might be expected from the age

and wisdom of the speaker, but promising, quite promising. Are we any of us ever always anything? I wonder."

"You are always very foolish, I think," she said, laughing.

"I assure you that you are mistaken," he assured her earnestly.

"Well, time will show," she said, as she accepted a sponge cake offered her by Roger, who remarked confidentially,

"When I go to live wiv God, I mean to have these every day."

Audrey was rather taken aback, but managed to answer with gravity, "Are you so very fond of sponge cakes?"

"This sort," he said. "I bought these myself in an awfly good shop. But I don't like the sort Mary Jenkins makes. They go all soft and fluffy in your mouf."

"Who is Mary Jenkins?" she said. "Is she the cook?"

"Oh no, the cook's a gentleman. He wears a white cap, and he took me for a drive once."

"Has he got a carriage, then?" enquired Audrey.

"He calls it a trap, but I never saw it catch anybody," Roger explained conscientiously.

"But it's awfly jolly to go in. And he gave me a shell box. He is awfly kind to me."

"Then who is Mary Jenkins?" said Audrey, sticking to the point.

"I fink she's the still room maid," said Roger. "She makes cakes and fings. She's a friend of Nanny's, and I go to tea wiv her sometimes. She is awfly kind too. But I like Mounseer best."

"Do you call him Mounseer?" asked Audrey.

"Everybody does," said the small boy, with decision.

"I wonder however many servants they have?" thought Audrey. "How stupid Monica and Laura will think me if I don't find out. Fancy a cook with a trap of his own."

"Bloated aristocrats, aren't we?" said Gerard, as if he had read her thoughts. "But it isn't a bad life for them on the whole, and they are not actively unhappy."

"I was wondering how many there were," said Audrey, with simple candour.

"Quite a regiment," said Gerard. "I know, for I am a friend of the house steward's. I believe there are thirty-five in the house, counting the groom of the chambers, who is a much greater swell than my father. And to

think we could be perfectly comfortable with thirty less."

"Not in this big house," she said practically. "I suppose that's what matters."

"How well you put things," said Gerard drily. "But it's quite true. *We* don't matter. But the place is a sort of trust. It costs my father nearly all it brings in to keep up, and we just scrape a bare living out of what's over."

"A bare living." Audrey smiled as she looked round the table, but she began to realise how little personal advantage the owners of big properties get from them, and how much the community gain from their existence.

"You haven't been here on a tourist day yet," resumed Gerard. "Hordes of barbarians traverse our marble halls, escorted by Mrs. Carpenter, pointing out the family portraits and other historical objects, while we flee before them, and crouch panting in dark corners till the invasion is past. I expect a nice party on Boxing Day."

"It is very good for them," said Audrey. "I've never seen a big house myself before, except in that way. I always felt much more interested in the family's private rooms than in all the big show ones."

"That shows a morbid curiosity," said Gerard sadly, "which grieves me. Now you can sympathise with the poor natives, hunted from pillar to post, and not wish to track them into their noisome dens."

"I believe I shall join the tourists on Boxing Day," said Audrey. "I can't get a word of sense out of you about all the things, and I am sure Mrs. Carpenter will be much more satisfying."

"Let's both join," said Gerard. "We'll wear each other's hats, and you shall have a scent squirt, and I will carry a 'ladies tormentor,' you know the thing that sounds like a long tear, when you run it playfully down your neighbour's back, so we shall be even more admired."

"Gerard," said Marjorie's clear voice, "when you've quite done prattling, we want to act charades."

Gerard sighed and rose. Marjorie beckoned him, and said, "Look here, Gigs, you must look after somebody else. You do nothing but jabber to Audrey."

"I think she finds me rather amusin'," he humbly said, but obediently proceeded to make himself agreeable to Lilian Adair, who was very shy of him, and only ventured on timid

acquiescence with everything he said. But when he had got her to agree to the propositions that Christmas was often warmer than Midsummer, and that the snow was rather too monotonous to be artistic, and that if it were a nice scarlet it would be more effective, and that lobsters made very good pets to keep in your muff, only they had better be boiled ones in the winter, he felt he had done his duty, and retired to his "sums."

Lilian Adair came up to Audrey, and said pleasantly, "What fun the tobogganing was today, wasn't it? I do hope the snow will last over Christmas."

"So do I," replied Audrey. "I have never had such a good time in my life."

"You were snowed up in the train, weren't you?" asked Lilian. "Weren't you very frightened?"

"Why, no," said Audrey. "What should we be frightened about? We were rather hungry and rather cold, but I am most awfully glad it happened."

"Didn't you know the Dorincourts before?" asked Lilian.

"Dear me, no," Audrey said. "I didn't know any of that sort of people. We live in quite a small way at home, you know."

"You seem to get on very well with Lord Windlesham," said Lilian. "I'm horribly afraid of him."

"I don't think I know the gentleman," said Audrey.

"Why, you were talking to him all teatime," exclaimed Lilian.

Audrey opened her eyes. "I didn't know that was his name," she said. "I have always heard him called Gerard, or 'Gigs.'"

"Shall you be here for the ball?" enquired Lilian.

"Yes indeed," replied Audrey, with an ecstatic hop of joy. "I'm simply counting the hours. I've never been to a real ball, much less a fancy one, in my life."

"They only call this a 'half and half,' explained Lilian. "But all the grown-ups come to it, and it is simply the greatest rag."

Audrey was not unaccustomed to slang at school, and the meaning of this remark was not hard to divine.

Then the Adairs left, and Lady Heversham insisted on a quiet evening, so they had a little music, and Dick came out strong in his one comic song, coming in in an old skirt of Alison's,

with a big hat with an ostrich feather in it, to sing,

> "In me 'air I wore a white camelliar,
> And dark blue wos the colour of me eyes.
> And 'e called me 'is little bunch of rowses,
> 'Is treasure, and 'is darling, and 'is prize."

Alison played on her violin, and Audrey, when asked, did her best with a little Grieg on the beautiful Bluthner piano, and was immensely gratified when Lady Heversham praised her touch and feeling.

They went to bed early, and the next day was Christmas Day.

Breakfast was late, to allow the elders to attend the early service, and Audrey, coming in alone to the cedar parlour, found quite a pile of parcels upon her plate, and heaped on chairs round the room were quantities of weird-shaped packages addressed to different members of the family, and when the party assembled there was much joyous guessing and opening, and embracing, and a great confusion of paper and string.

Audrey hardly knew how to thank for the charming white feather fan from Lord and Lady Heversham, the pair of long white gloves from Marjorie, the big box of chocolates from the

rabbits, the fat velvet mouse pincushion from Roger, and the little workcase from Alison.

Gerard, coming in later, gravely presented her with a long parcel, which, when unrolled from multitudinous wrappings, disclosed at first a monkey on a stick, which on examination proved to be wearing a dainty carved ivory thimble as a cap; and Dick's offering was a blue Bohemian glass vase. He presented it rather shamefacedly, saying, "I don't know if you like this sort of thing. It came from Prague. A chap I know went there last holidays. You see there wasn't time to get anything decent."

Audrey's eyes were wet as she shook hands all round, and bestowed the long desired kiss on Roger, which he endured with dignity and forbearance.

Then came the joyful Christmas service in the pretty village church, all wreathed with evergreens, and the happy simple hymns.

Audrey sat opposite a brass memorial tablet inscribed with the words

"Hugh Alured Dorincourt."
"Born May 18, 1860 — Died July 25, 1893."

The whole church seemed full of Dorincourts and Hevershams, from the early brasses of the Stuart time, through Georgian and early

Victorian monstrosities of statuary, to the more restrained taste of the present day. The font was inscribed to the memory of two infant children of Edward fourth Baron Dorincourt, 1678, the reading desk to Alured first Earl of Heversham and Viscount Windlesham, 1710, various stained glass windows, more faded banners, in the little chancel, recording gallant Dorincourts killed in action, statesmen Dorincourts, names well known in history and literature, and so forth.

A fine family record, she thought, and her heart swelled with the realisation of what an inspiration these traditions must be to the young generation growing up among them.

The day itself passed quietly, reading and writing letters, opening and displaying Christmas cards, and a distribution of presents among the servants.

Then came the grand Christmas dinner, when Mounseer himself carried in the boar's head, followed by quite a procession of white-capped assistants, with the turkey, roast beef, and other inconsiderable items.

After which the blazing plum pudding, and mountains of mince-pies arrived, the whole concluding with dessert and many crackers.

They dined in the banqueting hall, and looked quite inadequate to its stately spaces, though spread out as much as possible. A party of choir boys, trained by Marjorie, sang carols in the musicians' gallery, and Audrey felt she was back in the middle ages, with only the pleasing anachronisms of electric light and modern costume.

After dinner, Gerard rose and made a graceful little speech, proposing the health of his father and mother, with affectionate allusions to the tender love and devotion, which they all felt it should be the object of their lives to deserve and to return, and expressing in the names of his brothers and sisters the loving hopes inspired by the season, for their long life, health, and happiness.

The toast was drunk with three times three, little Roger, who had been allowed to sit up, after being sternly kept in bed all afternoon, creating a diversion by standing on the table, and putting his foot in a dessert dish, while he cheered his shrillest.

Lord Heversham then read evening prayers in the little dim old chapel attached to the house, where the imposing row of servants, and the large family party, made up quite a fine congregation.

Truly a memorable Christmas, and one which Audrey never forgot.

The next day, Boxing Day, the threatened horde of sightseers arrived, but Gerard took Audrey and Alison out sleighing, though the snow was showing signs of melting, which was another delightful new experience.

Then came the ball. Audrey was dressed in an antiquated costume, made to fit her by Marjorie's maid, of an ancestress of the family, whose portrait by Lely hung in the gallery.

The long flowing yellow robe, the soft muslin fichu, and high dressed hair, slightly powdered, under a big black velvet hat, quite transformed Audrey, and Gerard told her that he had many enquiries about her, until one old lady settled the matter by saying authoritatively, "A cousin of the family, of course. The Dorincourts have all such a strong family resemblance."

"Wonderful what a little imagination, coupled with a historical costume, will do," he said. But there was admiration in his hawklike eyes, and Audrey saw it, and for the first time in her life, blushed crimson.

She danced all the time, not that she was a first class performer, but the girls were such admirable hostesses, never leaving her without a

partner, and the boys filling up any gaps that occurred.

The whole evening was a great success, and it was nearly two o'clock when the last carriage drove away.

"This is the kids' great time," explained Dick to her. "We have the proper grown-up ball later, and the house full of all sorts of swells. But we always 'keep ourselves to ourselves' for Christmas. I believe you're the first visitor, not a relation, we've ever had."

"I shall never, never, forget it," said Audrey. "I couldn't have believed anything could ever be so absolutely perfect."

CHAPTER V

A CONTRAST

"As high as we have mounted in delight,
In our dejection do we sink as low."

WORDSWORTH.

A FEW days later, Audrey, with a sinking heart, was slowly traversing the muddy streets in a four-wheeler towards 11 Myrtle Road, Brixton.

After her experience of the splendid motor and luxurious carriages at Dorincourt, the cab felt stuffy and sordid, and the shining gas lamps reflected in the puddles looked vulgar and glaring. Even a taxi would have been better, and she felt her conveyance had all the inconveniences of antiquity, without its glamour.

Presently it drew up, and the rickety old driver crawled down and rang the bell. A long pause ensued, during which Audrey had leisure to note the white blisters on the grained painted door, the muddy doorsteps, and the clouded brass of the handle and knocker.

Then at last, Violet, the house parlourmaid, appeared, with her fringe very much out of curl, and a dirty apron.

"Lor', Miss Audrey, is it you?" she said. "I didn't expect you so soon."

"Is my aunt in?" enquired Audrey.

"No, that she isn't, nor the young lidies. They've all gone to a party at Mrs. Robson's."

"Isn't there any tea, then?" said Audrey.

"Well, the drorin-room fire's out, but cook and me's 'avin' a cup, Miss, and I can bring you some upstairs, if you like."

"Yes, do please," said Audrey wearily, paying the cab, and coming into the mean little hall. Her cousin Alfred's coats and caps hanging on the walnut hatstand, gave her a shudder of familiar aversion, and she felt lonely, sad, and unwelcome.

The cook came upstairs, wiping her greasy hands on her apron, and she and Violet carried Audrey's box up.

Audrey had a small room to herself, a boon she had often been thankful for, but today, as she lit the flaring gas jet, and looked round, its commonplace ugliness struck her forcibly.

The faded drab paper, the cheap painted wood dressing-table and washstand, the black iron

bedstead chipped and bent, the soiled blind hanging crookedly, the faded square of Kidderminster carpet, were like so many insults to her awakened perceptions, and although she had often felt the contrast from her clean cubicle at school, it had never struck her quite so sharply before. She spoke in a tone of vexation.

"Oh Violet, you might have had that blind mended. You broke it before I left, and it has never been touched."

Violet fired up at once. "And indeed Miss, it's little time I get for mending blinds. It's slave, slave! all day 'ere, and never a word of thanks. 'Owever, I shall be out of it in a week, thanks be."

"Oh, never mind," said Audrey. "Could I have that tea presently? I am tired and thirsty."

Violet departed, and we can hardly blame poor Audrey, if, sitting before the shabby little dressing-table, with its blotched looking-glass, and torn toilet cover, she let her face fall on her hands, and "wept a little weep."

But she roused up at the sound of the maid's return, with some strong sweet tea in a kitchen cup, and a plate of bread spread with the "best Dosset."

The food did her good, and she proceeded to unpack.

Gradually the little room became more home-like, as she spread her travelling rug over the bed, placed her photographs, among them several new ones of the Dorincourt family, on the chimney-piece, and laid her neat ebony brushes, and little blue velvet pincushion on the toilet table.

She unpinned a buttonhole of fragrant, long stalked violets from her coat, and placed them in Dick's little blue vase, and then bethought her of the big bunch of chrysanthemums, and the basket of grapes, which had been put into her railway carriage by the footman.

She knew also how welcome the brace of pheasants would be to her aunt's housewifely soul, and went downstairs in rather better spirits. Violet had re-lit the fire, and lighted the gas in the drawing-room, and Audrey arranged the flowers as nearly as she could after Marjorie's methods, and set them out to the best advantage on the various little tables.

Then she heard the front door shut, and voices in the hall, and knew the party had returned.

She heard exclamations of surprise, as Violet evidently informed them of her arrival, and a moment later her aunt entered the room.

She was a tall slight woman, with rather refined features and a sweet expression, but with a worried look, and a general appearance of having put her clothes on by accident.

She greeted Audrey affectionately, and sank down on to the sofa, saying, "How early you are back, dear. Alf said you couldn't be here till dinner time. I am sorry we were all out."

"Oh, it didn't matter a bit," Audrey said. "I was glad to get unpacked first, and Violet gave me some tea."

"I am glad of that," her aunt said. "She is a saucy girl, and cheeks your cousins, but I don't think she is bad-hearted. What lovely flowers! Did you bring them?"

"Yes, and some grapes, and some pheasants," answered Audrey. "Oh Auntie, they were so kind to me."

"The girls will be wild to hear all about it," said her aunt. "Here they come."

Laura and Monica were both short and dumpy, but they were dressed in the last extreme of fashion, as interpreted by "The Lady's Looking-glass." Long narrow skirts trailing on the ground, and beginning as high up as the exigencies of their figures allowed, buttoned with many buttons, and falling into folds never

contemplated by their originators. Laura's was salmon, and Monica's pale green, and as both were slightly dishevelled and flushed, they hardly looked their best.

But they were in excellent spirits, and greeted Audrey much more warmly than usual.

"Well, you *have* been having a time," said Monica. "Now tell us all about it, and how you got on with all the lords and ladies."

"And you can tell us all about the fashions," chimed in Laura. "Are Directoires still in, and is it true that pork-pie hats are to be worn."

"I never noticed," said Audrey. "Lady Marjorie wore a white satin evening frock the first night I was there, and a brown dress with a beautiful sable coat one day. I really never noticed the style. She always looked perfectly sweet."

"How stupid of you," said Laura. "Well, go on, tell us all about it."

Audrey felt rather hopeless. Their interests were so different to hers, but she obediently gave them a list of the names of the whole family, relating how she had disclaimed the acquaintance of Lord Windlesham, until she had discovered him to be her friend Gerard.

"Were all the boys lords?" asked Monica in an awestruck voice.

"No, Dick and Roger were only Honourables," said Audrey. "I saw it on their letters."

"Fancy a little chap of six being an Honourable!" said Monica. "And the little girls were all Ladyships, weren't they? How funny!"

"They called Patricia and Honor 'the rabbits,'" said Audrey. "They never used their titles. Only the servants did. One forgot all about them, they were so jolly and natural. I was rather afraid of Lady Heversham. She was so tall and dignified, and always so beautifully dressed, and she spoke slowly, and in rather a sort of aloof way, I thought. But the children all simply adored her. The boys all called her 'Darling.'"

"What was the Earl like?" enquired Laura.

"Oh, he was never called that," said Audrey. "He was tall and thin and brown, and rather silent. But he talked very nicely to me. I liked him because he was so like Gerard, who was an absolute lamb. I don't believe he said one single word of sense the whole time. But he had lots of sense really. Marjorie told me he helped his father about everything to do with the estate, the accounts, and all that. He was busy about them all the time. He did a lot of agency work too, and was so dependable and

steady that everybody looked to him. He was at Oxford, and was going in for Diplomacy, I believe."

"Go on, about the others," said Laura.

"Dick is to be a soldier. He was a jolly boy, and little Roger told me he was going to be an engine driver first, and then a giant."

"Tell us about the ball now," said Monica. "What did they all wear?"

"Gerard said he should do the most execution of them all, and so he did, for he came as an executioner, all in black, with a black mask, and a big axe. Nobody knew him hardly, only I guessed him by his eyes."

Audrey saw her two cousins exchange a meaning glance, and her innocent confidences shrivelled up, her cheeks burnt, and she stopped abruptly, reddening violently.

"Go on," said Monica. "It's perfectly thrilling. Some people have all the luck. What did Dick wear?"

"Dick," said Audrey, in a changed tone. "Oh, Dick was a French cook. Not very original, he said, but cool and cheap."

"I should have thought those sort of people never bothered about cheapness," observed Monica.

"Oh, they were wonderfully like the rest of the world," said Audrey drily. She had not forgiven that meaning glance.

"Go on, don't shut up like a box," cried Laura. "What did Marjorie wear?"

"Lady Marjorie was a lady of Louis XIV.'s Court, all brocade and powder and patches, and Alison was some kind of Bohemian peasant, I believe. Oh, by the way, I must show you my Christmas presents."

"Not now, do go on telling us," persisted Monica. "Did the Earl and Countess dress up too?"

"I wish you wouldn't call them that," said Audrey, rather sharply. "No, they said it was only a children's party."

"I suppose it was a beautiful supper," said Mrs. Baxter, speaking for the first time.

"Rather," said Audrey. "All on little tables in the banqueting hall. And there was a great lovely ball-room, quite separate from all the other rooms, with a ceiling all painted like the sky, with little pink Cupids playing hide and seek in the clouds, and holding wreaths of roses to each other. Oh, it was lovely."

"Well," said Monica, still rather huffy after her snub. "I don't know if you can bring your mind

down to such common things, but I know I want my supper now, and I can smell toasted cheese."

"Oh Monica, and you had such a tea at the Robson's. I saw you have muffins three times."

"Well, you see, Tommy Robson was so attentive," simpered Monica. "I couldn't go on refusing."

"That sort of man doesn't think anything of a girl for eating too much," remarked Mrs. Baxter. "He thinks of the housekeeping bills."

"Goodness, Mother, you do go ahead," said Monica, hugely pleased. "But I thought you were getting on pretty well yourself, Laura, with Mr. Claude Heskett."

"Oh, he," said Laura, slightingly. "His father is only a dentist, though he calls himself a dental surgeon. Oh, I should never think of him."

"Well, you were pretty sick when he took up his half proverb to Susie Lane. 'Handsome is—' don't you know."

"Well, she wasn't best pleased," retorted Laura. "It wasn't much of a compliment, whichever way you look at it."

"Girls, don't squabble," feebly said Mrs. Baxter. "Isn't that father's latchkey? Go up and wash your hands, and don't make a noise. He'll be tired tonight."

CHAPTER VI

DULL DAYS

"In common things the law of sacrifice takes the form of positive duty."

FROUDE.

THE snow had all melted into unattractive pea-soup, and the streets looked particularly uninviting when Audrey looked out next morning.

The houses in Myrtle Road stood back from the pavement, each in its own little "garden," as the proud owners called them. The sticky square of grass, the bare dripping lilacs or plane trees, and the grubby privet hedges, merited little such a description, and to Audrey, fresh from the wide clean view of sloping lawn, wide terrace with its marble balustrade, and open park beyond, it was almost painful to think that the same name could be applied to both.

There was a dusky haze, though hardly a fog, which darkened the grimy windows, and Audrey

turned with a sigh from the dismal prospect. Though Violet had brought up a lukewarm can of water, there was no delicious fresh tea in a dainty china service, and no comfortable fire, lit by a noiseless maid, to dress by.

But Audrey was a sensible girl, and what was more, knew the best way to get the burden of depression lifted, and by the time she had finished her dressing, had bravely faced the fact, that though she had had a glimpse of an earthly Paradise, this was her home, and here lay her duty.

So she put on her neat school serge, and came down to breakfast, determined to make the best of it.

She found her uncle, an untidy-looking, harassed person, with a ragged greyish beard, helping himself to kippers, and trying to read the "Daily Mail" at the same time.

He gave his niece a perfunctory peck on the cheek, observing that it was a fine day, and that he was late, and then promptly forgot her existence.

"Modern Society," Laura's special reading, lay beside her plate, but Audrey knew better than to open her cousin's correspondence, even if she had felt drawn to it. So she went to the little sulky

fire, and put the toast rack down in front of it, to try and warm it up.

"How late the others are," grumbled Mr. Baxter. "It really is too bad my having to make the tea, and do everything myself, when I'm late as it is."

"They were tired, I daresay, after the party," suggested Audrey.

"Tired, nonsense. Overeaten themselves, more likely. Ah, Mother, here you are at last. Give me another cup. The water isn't boiling. I can't drink this stuff."

"Violet is perfectly hopeless," sighed Mrs. Baxter. "She never knows when the water is boiling. Servants never do."

"Let me fetch the kettle," suggested Audrey. "The fire can make itself useful, and boil it up."

"Oh, no," Mrs Baxter was beginning feebly, but Audrey was off, and back again with the kettle, which, being taken hot from the kitchen stove, was soon able to supply Mr. Baxter with a good cup of tea.

"That's something like," he said, as he hastily wiped his beard, and stood up. "Why don't you always have the kettle here, Edwina? It makes all the difference."

"I'm sure the girls wouldn't allow it," said

Mrs. Baxter. I am afraid she said "gurls," but the difference is very slight. "It looks so bad."

"Well, I'm off," said the husband, leaving the room without further ceremony.

Audrey helped him into his shabby coat, and returned to the dining-room.

"Put down the bacon, there's a dear," said her aunt. "Alf can't bear it cold."

"Where was Alf last night?" enquired Audrey.

"I'm sure I don't know," returned his mother. "He's so gay nowadays there's no holding him. Up till three and four dancing nearly every night. I often tell him I'm sure he can't do his work properly all day, and he uses such a lot of white ties."

"I suppose there is a lot going on just now," said Audrey.

"Only just look at the cards," said Mrs. Baxter. "I suppose it's good for young people to enjoy themselves, but I sometimes think the girls are getting into rather a low set. I was never allowed to go to a tradesman's party when I was a girl, unless they were wholesale. But they won't listen to me. I often say to them that their father's worked himself up into a good position, and that they oughtn't to lower themselves. Now Alf is different. He goes to quite

swell places. Only last week he went to a titled house. Lady Jones was the name, and he thinks the same as I do."

"Here they come," said Audrey, as Monica in a plaid silk blouse and blue skirt came in, looking pale and heavy-eyed, and followed by Laura, with her fringe still in curling pins.

"Laura," said her mother fretfully, "you know I don't like you to come down to breakfast like that. It's like the servants."

"Oh, well," said Laura indifferently, "there's nobody here to see me, and a foggy day like this always makes me a perfect sight, and we've got the Tillotson's ball tonight."

"And somebody's going to be there, isn't he?" said Monica teasingly, and Laura bridled.

"What are you all going to do today?" asked Mrs. Baxter.

"It's such a nuisance all this slush to walk in," Monica said. "I was going to Evans to match these stockings, but one gets soaked through only going to the bus."

"What's Audrey going to do?" asked her aunt again.

"I don't know," said Audrey hopelessly. "I must get out, but I've nowhere particular to go, and nothing to do."

"I've got some calls to pay this afternoon. If you like you can come with me," said Mrs. Baxter. "The girls ought to lie down before the ball. I'm going to the Lakins. They always have a good tea."

"Rather Audrey than me," said Laura. "I loathe calling on a lot of dull people, and paddling about in the mud all day. I shall stop at home and read."

"I'll come if you like, Auntie," said Audrey, unwillingly. "But I'd rather go for a good walk somewhere."

"You can't go alone," said her aunt. "We'll go on the top of the bus if you like. But you'd better come with me, if your hat's tidy."

So Audrey sighed and acquiesced.

When they had all finished, Alf came in. He was a medical student, and possessed all the charm of manner for which that distinguished body is eminent. He was short like his sisters, and round. His hair was shiny, and parted down the middle, with an engaging curl at each side. His morning attire was slovenly, a loose shooting jacket, with a waistcoat of another pattern, and trousers of yet a third. His blue tie, in which he wore a sporting pin, was stained with tobacco, and his chin had not known the

razor that morning. But there was a good-natured twinkle in his little grey eyes, and he was an acknowledged humourist in his own circle.

He lounged in and sat down, while his mother solicitously waited upon him, and Audrey stood and regarded him from a distance, twirling the tassel of the blind cord in her fingers.

"What had happened to her?" she wondered. Had a new perception come to her, or had the scales merely fallen from her eyes?

She had been accustomed to regard her cousins with a good-natured tolerance, as beings whose world lay outside hers.

Her schoolmistress had cultivated her mind, and trained her naturally refined instincts, but she had never inspired her with this contempt for the tastes, pursuits, and, alas, the persons of people with fewer advantages.

Surely, Audrey thought, she must be growing wicked. Alf was no worse then when she had last seen him, and he had always been kind and good-natured to her. She must struggle against this feeling. It must be wrong, and it certainly was awkward. But when before her mental vision there arose the picture of Gerard, with his neat well-fitting clothes, his spotless linen,

and general air of unconscious refinement, poor unshaven slovenly Alf, with his cheap smartness and showy vulgarity, hardly seemed a human being at all.

Making an effort, she forced herself to say to him,

"Good morning, Alf; you haven't spoken to me yet."

"By Jove, no more I have," he replied. "I forgot I hadn't seen you before. So you've been having a razzle-dazzle among the toffs, I hear."

Audrey admitted the fact, though demurring to the description, but he rattled on.

"Suppose you didn't pick up a nice young Dook, or so, did you? Or was there a smart young woman to suit me, I wonder?"

Audrey looked disgusted, but suppressed the retort which rose to her lips, of "among the housemaids, I daresay," and merely replied, "They were all more than good to me. I never met such a delightful family."

"Oh ho, and so there was a young man. Look out, girls, you'll have Audrey cutting you both out, and marrying a noble marquis." And he whistled a bar of "Molly the Marchioness."

"I think I must go and write a letter, Auntie," said Audrey with dignity, and went to the door.

"Nothing to be sniffy about, my dear. You know they'd give their eyes to have spoken to a lord."

But Audrey had escaped.

Alone in her room, she paced up and down, with clenched hands and burning cheeks. How was she going to endure the rest of the holidays with these people. Today was only January the 2nd, and she had to stay until January the 23rd. She regretted the refusal she had given to one of her schoolfellows who had asked her to stay. She had had a sort of sense of duty to her relatives, and the girl had not been an intimate friend, but she wished now she had accepted. She was generally away with one or other school friend during the spring and summer holidays, but for Christmas she had always come home. Home. The word seemed a mockery. Surely her true home was with her new friends. Their minds seemed to be in tune with hers. Their atmosphere was one she could breathe in.

Here she broke off her reflections, and sat down to write a letter of thanks to Lady Heversham. She hesitated how to address the envelope, then decided to write to Marjorie, judging that she knew how her envelopes looked.

Audrey wrote a good letter. Her natural candour was tempered with a sense of humour, and her gratitude was so real that it could hardly help expressing itself. She wrote from the heart, and Marjorie, reading the letter, felt it was more than the usual stereotyped thanks, and passed it over to her mother, who read it with her usual gentle stateliness, returning it with the remark, "That is a nice girl. We must ask her here again."

"She plays hockey first rate," said Dick. "She's centre forward at her school. Let's get her down for the match next week."

But Lady Heversham shook her head. "Not quite so soon, I think, Dick. We mustn't take her from her own people again at once. Perhaps next summer she might come for a longer visit."

So Audrey remained at Brixton, gradually becoming accustomed to the routine of life there again.

She sometimes got away for a drive on the top of a bus, to some open space, where she could see the sky, and get a breath of fresh air. But these occasions were rare, for her aunt clung to the conventionalities, and Audrey had to wait till one of her cousins was free, and willing to come.

Once or twice Alf brought in tickets for a matinée, in the cheap seats, given him by a friend, and good-naturedly included Audrey in the party.

She had always loved the theatre, like all imaginative girls, and she found these expeditions a pleasant break in her monotonous life, and was grateful to her cousin.

The rest of the time seemed spent in a round of small shopping, dull calls, an occasional tea-party, or afternoon dance, to which she was bidden, as, not being "out," she could not attend more ambitious entertainments. But she showed so much indifference to these joys that one day Alf remonstrated with her.

"What's up with you, Audrey? This is the third time you've refused to go to a hop. You used to be keen enough. Why are you such a wet blanket?"

"Perhaps she won't dance with any one under a lord," suggested Monica waspishly, and Audrey, with a start, realised that her cousin spoke more truly than she knew. But she laughed it off, and Alf roughly snubbed his sister, on her behalf, which was a certain solace to her.

The days passed away, and the 23rd came, and Audrey, with a sensation of relief, packed

herself and her boxes into another four-wheeler, and started on her return journey to school, though this time no friendly snow storm intervened, to give her another glimpse of her Paradise, and she passed the little station in an express which barely gave her time to see its name as she was whisked through, though she had eagerly watched for it.

CHAPTER VII

BEREAVEMENT

"Ah, surely nothing dies, but something mourns."

BYRON.

AT last the dreary holidays were over, and Audrey had said farewell to her relations without regret. She was mildly attached to her gentle aunt, though in her youthful judgment she thought she "gave in" a great deal too much.

But the poor lady, with her querulous husband, and masterful family, had long decided to follow the line of least resistance. As far as she had any deep feelings, she was attached to Audrey, the child of her dead sister, and liked to have her in the house, besides which the three hundred a year she received for her upbringing and education was a considerable help to the family finances.

Audrey's father had made a lucky speculation before his death, and had settled the

capital on his wife, so his daughter was not penniless.

It was to the credit of Mrs. Baxter that she had sent her niece to an expensive and first rate school, instead of economising in that respect, and the result had been thoroughly satisfactory, as Audrey's education, appearance, and manners showed.

It was possibly a sort of instinctive jealousy of their cousin's superiority, that sharpened the edge of both Monica's and Laura's speeches, and caused them to snub and ignore her as much as possible.

The consequence was that with them, Audrey became abrupt, reserved, and sarcastic, and so the rift widened daily.

Audrey met several schoolfellows in the train, and by the time they had arrived at the little west country station, she had forgotten all about her home troubles, in laughing and chattering, and relating and hearing news.

The hotel omnibus was awaiting the girls, and they drove the three miles to the house in very good spirits.

Miss Fenwick was the daughter of a distinguished Church dignitary, and was a well read, refined, and intellectual woman.

Her influence with her pupils was very great, and though she did not show favouritism, it was well known in the school that Audrey Denver was the person to solicit a half-holiday, or suggest any small favour that was required, even before she had attained her present lofty position as head of the lower school.

Miss Fenwick, tall, spare, rather sharp featured, and with fair hair turning grey, met them in the hall with affectionate greetings.

But it was on Audrey's shoulder that her hand rested longest, and her austere features relaxed into a kindly smile as the girl looked frankly up into her eyes, and stroked the hand before it was withdrawn.

When the girls had bustled upstairs to their various rooms and cubicles, and the luggage had been apportioned and carried off, Audrey came down again, without her hat and coat, and with her brown wavy hair tied back with a crimson ribbon, and tapped at the door of Miss Fenwick's sitting room.

She was summoned in, and invited to partake of the comfortable tea laid by the bright fire. This was one of the most prized privileges of her position, and on the first day of term was an established custom. There was a certain amount

of business to be transacted, the choice of monitors for the term, a discussion as to the arrangement of the rooms, a little talk over newcomers, and girls who had left, alterations in the hours for games, and so on.

Audrey's advice was often taken, and her opinion always considered, and this had partly helped to steady her character, and give her a sense of responsibility.

When the preliminaries were settled, Audrey sat down on a stool on the hearthrug, and leaning her head against Miss Fenwick's knee, fell into a reverie, gazing at the fire.

Her schoolmistress did not interrupt her thoughts, but taking up some knitting, worked in silence.

Presently Audrey looked up. "Do you know, Miss Fenwick," she said, "I'm afraid I'm growing into a regular wicked, vulgar little snob."

"And why?" was Miss Fenwick's quiet enquiry.

"It seems too bad to admire people who have riches and rank and all that, and who have everything made easy for them, and to despise other people who are poor, and — not very well educated, and who never seem to have had a chance, and that's exactly what I can't help doing," said Audrey.

"My dear," said Miss Fenwick. "It all depends what you admire or despise them for. Surely you don't respect people because they are rich or highly placed, nor think badly of others because they are neither. It must be that you admire the qualities that are developed by one set of circumstances, or the contrary. Isn't that so?"

Audrey considered, and said, "Ye-es, I suppose so, but it is so difficult to separate one's feelings."

"I think you can easily find out," said Miss Fenwick. "Suppose your rich friends were reduced to poverty, and had to live in a small shabby way. Should you at once cease to care for them?"

"Of course not," said Audrey. "I should like them all the more."

"And if your poor friends became rich, should you instantly begin to respect and admire them?"

"Certainly not," said Audrey, with decision. "I think they would be more odious than ever."

"So you see," said Miss Fenwick, smiling, "that you are not such a dreadful snob after all. Now tell me who are these people that have stirred up such alarming doubts in your mind."

And Audrey, with alacrity, entered into the history of her adventures. Miss Fenwick listened without comment. She had seen Audrey's people when in London, so had no need to ask who the contrasting group were, and when Audrey concluded with the words, "You see, dear Miss Fenwick, I seemed to be at home with them, just as if they were my relations, and when I got back, I felt like a stranger with my own people. It is funny, isn't it?"

"It often happens so," said Miss Fenwick, "and I am very glad, for your sake, that you have made such delightful friends, and I hope you will always feel the same towards them. Now it is seven o'clock, and time to start the little ones to bed."

The next morning Audrey began the regular round of school routine, which with its steady methodical rules and habit of application to business, with few leisure times, helped her to pass the days, and gradually efface the memory of those eventful Christmas holidays.

But she kept up a correspondence with Alison, who constantly referred to the idea of her coming to Dorincourt again, for a "proper visit" in the summer holidays. The family had left the country, and were in London, in Carlton

House Terrace, where they were to stay for the Parliamentary session, with the exception of a few days in the country at Easter.

"I do hate London," Alison wrote. "Nothing but east winds and yellow fog. I am doing a lot of lessons, and classes and things, and I hardly ever see Marjorie. She is simply gadding from morning till night. I get some riding, though, which is better than nothing, though both Black Beauty and I get perfectly sick of the old Row. The pink almond at the Kensington Gardens' end is out. The first sign of spring, but it looks shivered, poor thing. Oh, dear, I shall be glad to go home to dear Dorincourt. Gerard is back at Oxford, and says he is awfully busy. Dick has got his football colours this term, and is as pleased as Punch. Are you getting any hockey? What fun we will have in the summer. Write again soon. Your letters are much appreciated."

Audrey, in her new position this term, had been given a room to herself, which was considered a great honour, though she had been quite fond of her cubicle.

She had often been rather envious of the other girls' possessions in the form of photographs of their homes and relations, that they proudly

hung on their walls, or stood on their shelves and tables.

Poor Audrey had felt that the pictures of her people were hardly ornamental enough to bear the scathing criticism of her friends, but from a sense of loyalty had mounted a faded old-fashioned portrait of her aunt, and a snap-shot of her two cousins playing tennis, on her little chest of drawers.

Now however she had a postcard of Dorincourt Castle, and a big family group, taken by Dick, and rather successfully for an amateur, which were among her most cherished treasures.

Her greatest friend, Rachel Maynard, a quiet looking girl in the upper school, was never tired of hearing about the joys and glories of Dorincourt, and Audrey found it a great relief to have somebody to pour it all out to. She was to spend the short Easter holiday with Rachel in the north, and was not going back to Brixton at all.

She received occasional letters from her aunt, but the girls were not good correspondents. The last letter had been more depressed in tone than usual, though they were never very exhilarating. Her aunt complained of a shortness of breath, and intermittent attacks of faintness,

which alarmed Audrey. "It's the spring weather," she said, "and these east winds. I shall be better when the summer comes. I expect every day to hear that Monica is engaged to Mr. Thomas Robson. If she isn't, she ought to be ashamed of the way she follows him about. I don't know what she sees in him myself, but I believe he is steady, and has got good prospects, and I should be glad for one of the girls to get settled. Alf is getting rather wild, I am afraid, and neglecting his work. It worries your uncle, but what can I do? I am glad to hear you are so happy, and getting on with your lessons. Some day I will tell you all about your father and mother. I've waited till you were old enough, but I don't feel as if I ought to wait much longer."

Audrey's heart beat when she read these words. She had never been told much about her parents, beyond the fact that her father had died abroad before she was born, and her mother when she was two years old. Her uncle and aunt had not always lived in Brixton, and she had vague recollections of a red house in a country road, with a white may tree by the front gate. Her aunt had brought her up, but Audrey had no recollection of any great affection. An

untidy nursery, a succession of casual nursery maids, and a rather neglected wardrobe, were her principal reminiscences, with a quarrelsome party of elder children snatching and bickering continually with each other.

But at the age of eight she had been sent to school, when it seemed to her that her happiest time had begun.

She was popular with the other girls, she was so good-tempered and amusing, and had not been so astonishingly superior in any particular line as to call forth any jealousy.

But she had always kept a good average place in class, and her natural sweet disposition, and a certain clearness of judgment, had made her influence marked in her small circle.

She put down her aunt's letter, with a little foreboding at her heart, but a call to hockey roused her, and she soon forgot her uneasiness.

When she returned, hot and muddy, and ran up to tidy for tea, there was an orange envelope on her dressing-table.

It said, "Mother died this morning. Funeral on Friday. Father wants you to come. Monica."

She stared at it, bewildered, then slowly brushed her hair, repeating the words and trying to realise them. Then she threw down the

brush, and snatching up the telegram, ran to Miss Fenwick.

It was a dreary journey back to town. A miserable household, the girls red-eyed and dazed, her uncle helpless and overcome, poor Alf, all his little vulgarities forgotten, sobbing openly, with his rough head on the dining-room table.

Then the formal funeral cortege and the gloomy surroundings where they laid her to rest. The wretched home-coming to the empty house, through the unsympathetic streets beginning to show spring flowers and fashions. It was all like a dismal dream.

But her uncle seemed to lean on Audrey more than on his own daughters. "She was always fond of you, Audrey," he said. "She gave me a packet for you only three days ago. It was only old letters, she said, but you ought to have it. I put it in my desk. Here it is. You had better go back to Miss Fenwick. This is a sad house for a young thing. The girls and I must begin to get used to each other, and it is no use keeping you. Bless you, my dear niece, I shall always remember she was fond of you."

CHAPTER VIII

LETTERS

"Letters admit not of a half renown,
They give you nothing, or they give a crown."

YOUNG.

"DEAR ALISON,

Do you really mean that your mother asks me to come and stay a whole month with you in the summer holidays?

Words are entirely useless to express my feelings on the subject, as I hope you realise. It will be simply sublime. Please thank Lady Heversham most awfully for asking me.

Just think how much I owe to that darling snow-drift. If it hadn't been for that I should be preparing to spend two months with poor uncle and the cousins, six weeks at Brixton, and the first fortnight in August at Herne Bay or somewhere.

I wish I didn't feel so disagreeable toward them, especially as I really feel sorry for uncle, he has

such a horrid existence, with Monica engaged and Laura trying to be!

I had a very nice fortnight in Yorkshire with the Maynards. Rachel left school at Easter, and has just put up her hair. I did my best to dissuade her from the Burne Jones style, but failed, I regret to say. School feels so funny without her.

I spent four days alone with Miss Fenwick before term began; it was awfully nice, she is such a dear. A sister of hers was here too, quite an artist, and enthused me with sketching. So I have acquired another hobby.

What a long letter this is, but it is a wet half holiday, and I have done my prep. We are having some jolly tennis now; there is a new lawn, made last year.

There are only three new girls this term. A kid of nine, a fat party of about thirteen, and a pretty girl of fifteen, who I fear me is a minx.

I shall be in the upper school next term, where I daresay I shall need, and I shall certainly get, a good deal of chastening after my proud position as head of the lower school, where I am a much greater swell than I shall ever be in my life again.

I must stop, the length of this epistle is due to the excitement caused by your invitation.

Love to everybody you think will profit by it, and many many thanks to your mother.

Your loving

AUDREY."

It will be seen from this letter that Audrey had recovered her spirits. Indeed, at sixteen, life is so full of interest that there is no time to sit down and mope, and though, as we know, Audrey had been sincerely fond of her aunt, yet her real life lay apart from her.

She had taken the first opportunity of reading the old letters. There were only five or six of them,—one only from her father to her mother, written just after their marriage, announcing his arrival at Calgary in Alberta, whence he had gone on the prospecting expedition from which he was never to return.

It was an affectionate, but not a sentimental letter. No forebodings seem to have existed in his mind, and he was evidently quite unaware of his wife's hopes. He told her he would be back in two or three months, and ended, her affectionate husband, Hugh Denver.

The next was a letter from Audrey's mother

to her sister, Mrs. Baxter, saying how Hugh had never returned from that expedition, how she had written in vain to the address he had given in Calgary, and after a long time had had an illiterate letter from the innkeeper, which was also enclosed.

"DEAR MADAME,

Hi am sorry to inform you that the gent left here on the morning of July 20th, 1893, and as never returned, though he left some bagage ere.

His Indian guide came back a month after e'd lef, and ses e'd fallen over a shelf, and a rock ad fallen on 'im. He was taken to the nearest stopping-house, and died there. They said as e ad spoke plain once, and giv his name and adres, to send a letter to, which they done as requested. As you 'adn't eard, I suppose there was some mistake.

I am sendin you the bag and other things as e lef here, and I hope you will pay the carige, as I am a pore man.

Yours to oblige,

JAMES HICKS."

"Poor father and mother," sighed Audrey. "How dreadful for her to hear in that way."

Then came a letter saying that the shock had made her too ill to go to Calgary herself, and also that it was too expensive to send anybody else, as there was no railway there in those days.

So she had remained quietly in the settlers' house at Macleod where her husband had left her, where there was a kind woman. There her baby, a girl, had been born. "A beautiful child," wrote the poor mother, "and so like Hugh."

And she went on to say that her health had been so bad that she was coming back to England with the baby.

In this letter Audrey learnt that the money settled upon her mother was bringing about three hundred a year.

"That accounts for Uncle John being able to afford to send me to Miss Fenwick's," thought Audrey. "That is a relief. I always wondered why he sent me to so much better a school than his own girls."

A little package was enclosed in the parcel, which Audrey opened, and found a signet ring, with a coat of arms engraved on it. She did not examine it closely at the time, but put it away carefully.

There were one or two more letters about arrangements and journeys, and so on, but nothing of much interest, and Audrey thought sadly, as she folded them up again, that she didn't seem to know her mother any better. "I must get Monica to give me that faded photograph in Aunt Edwina's old album, of my mother and me as a baby. I do wish I had a photo of my father. There seems to be nobody to tell me about them now. Poor Auntie, I wish I had talked to her more."

The summer term was well advanced when Audrey wrote to Alison, accepting her invitation, and the girls were playing tennis and croquet, and wearing cotton frocks, while the long windows of the big schoolroom stood open all day, and let in the soothing swish of the mowing machine and the songs of the birds.

Miss Fenwick had rented a large rambling country house and turned it into a school. It had large gardens, enclosed in fine old walls, and wide playing fields sloping down to a clear stream.

She encouraged the girls to be out of doors as much as possible, and had a safe rowing-boat and a roomy bathing-box for them. The river was not very deep, nor very rapid, and in the long hot summer days bathing was very popular.

There was a capable swimming mistress, and Audrey had rather distinguished herself in that line, an accomplishment which was to stand her in good stead.

The hours for lessons were rather long, but the food was plentiful and excellent, and the games they played and the exercises they took kept them in good health.

There were about thirty girls in the school, beginning with tall young maidens of 17 and 18, being "finished," and ending with shy little newcomers of eight and nine.

Audrey was one of the oldest pupils, having been there for eight years, but she was too young to be in the upper school yet, though she had many friends in its ranks.

She had drawn such attractive pictures of her life, in her letters to Alison, that the latter, who felt a little solitary, with Marjorie out, and the rabbits so much younger, had begun to petition her mother to send her also to Miss Fenwick's.

But Lady Heversham had made no decided answer yet, though both girls were feverishly anxious for her to decide, and Audrey hoped to add some personal persuasions when she was again at Dorincourt.

Among the new "hobbies" she had mentioned

in her letter to Alison, heraldry had become one. Some of the elder girls had taken it up, and Audrey had been attracted.

They met once a week to discuss armorial bearings, and to describe coats of arms in heraldic terms, and talked most learnedly of argent and or, chevrons, bordures, and fesses.

In consequence of this, it became the fashion to seal every letter, even the most inconsiderable of notes, and Audrey had produced her father's signet ring for this purpose.

The impression it gave was of a shield supported by two drawn swords, and carrying the figure of a lion couchant, clasping an earl's coronet between his paws, with the motto, "Wake me not."

The crest above it was a helmet, encircled with a laurel wreath.

"What a grand seal you have," said Maisie Merrilies, commonly called Merry Maisie, as the girls sat in conclave.

"It was my father's signet ring," said Audrey.

"Let's read it by the book," said another girl, and they laboriously traced out the terms, but lacking the colours were unable to make a proper description, and so gave it back to the owner, who replaced it in her writing case.

She was rather proud of it, as proving to her mind her gentle birth, and it occurred to her to look up her father's name in the old Burke they possessed, but to her disappointment the search proved fruitless.

So she said no more about it, and determining to ask her uncle how he became possessed of it, dismissed the subject from her mind.

The end of term was always rather a busy time with exams., and Audrey worked hard for her remove into the upper school.

There was the usual big prize-giving day, and the girls, dressed in the orthodox white muslins, entertained admiring relatives and critical schoolmates with a series of dramatic and musical performances in the large classroom.

Audrey did not attempt any very distinguished public appearance, beyond a pianoforte solo, so kept close to Miss Fenwick, ready to run her messages and forestall her wishes, and clapped her more accomplished acquaintances with hearty good will.

"That's one of the things I like about Audrey Denver," said Maisie. "She hasn't got a scrap of jealousy about her. I am glad she got the swimming prize as well as her good conduct one. She really ought to have had the history prize

too, but I know she missed out a question by helping that stupid little Gentian Clarke, and just lost the points that gave it to that fat new girl. I know I should have been pretty angry, but she was as good-tempered as she could be about it."

"She hasn't got her people here to see her," said another girl, rather sardonically. "I believe they're not particularly presentable either."

"Nobody cares here what a girl's people are," fired up Maisie, "as long as she's a good sort herself. You haven't been here long enough to know that. But I tell you Audrey Denver is the most popular girl in the school, by a long chalk."

"Well, I've nothing to say against it," was the reply, and the girls parted with some coolness.

Next day Audrey remembered to write to her uncle about the ring, and received for answer:

"My Dear Niece,

Your mother had the signet ring, and asked your dear aunt to keep it for her. I distinctly remember her saying that your father had always worn it, but that he had slightly hurt his hand, and before going off on his last expedition he

took it off and gave it to her to keep. It seems the only personal piece of jewellery he possessed."

And then with a few items of family news the letter closed.

How short and unsatisfactory everything she could collect about her parents seemed to Audrey. She had occasional moments of depression and loneliness, as she contrasted her lot with that of other happier girls; but she was something of a philosopher in her way, and found the proverb, "What can't be cured, must be endured," a useful guide to conduct.

Besides, who could be depressed for long, with Dorincourt, dear Dorincourt, looming in the immediate future. So Audrey put her prize books in her little bookcase, pinned on the little gun-metal and gold hanging watch, which had been her reward for the swimming and life-saving competition, and resolutely set herself to look only on the sunny side of the way.

CHAPTER IX

GRAND COMPANY

"What have princes, that privates have not too, save ceremony."

SHAKESPEARE.

AT last the blissful moment had come, and Audrey was in the comfortable, old-fashioned schoolroom at Dorincourt, with Alison sitting on the arm of her chair, the rabbits frisking round her, and Roger on her lap.

She had arrived rather late in the afternoon, and Alison had met her in her own little pony cart, as she said the motors were both out with the elders, who had gone to open a bazaar some miles off.

"Mother said she hoped you'd excuse her," said Alison, with the courteous consideration to a guest, however inconsiderable, that they had all been taught, "but she couldn't help it. The Princess had only this one day free, and you see mother had to go with her."

"What Princess?" said Audrey. "Do you mean to say you have a real live Princess staying here? And I've never even seen one."

"Well," said Alison, laughing, "she isn't one of the King's own daughters, you know. But she's quite a swell, and we all have to bob when she speaks to us. But she is very kind and gentle, and she and mother are very old friends. I think Lady Adela French is much more alarming. Her lady-in-waiting, you know."

"Dear me, it sounds like a fairy tale," said Audrey. "But, I say, I don't know how to bob. What shall I do if I see her?"

"Oh, you can copy any village child," said Alison, "though mother likes us to be a little more graceful over it, if we can. Look, like this. You'll see her tonight, but we young ones don't dine down. We have our dinner in the summer parlour, which is ever so much nicer this hot weather."

"Where are your brothers?" said Audrey.

"Dick's out fishing. Don't fidget, Roger. But poor Gerard's dancing attendance. He didn't like it a bit, but father's in town, voting for something or other awfully important in the House, and so Gigs is on duty. They ought to be back soon. What's the matter, Roger?"

"I say, will Audrey come fissing with me tomorrow?" enquired the little boy anxiously. "I know a wipping big twout under the mill bridge."

"Of course I will," said Audrey, giving him a hug. "But I don't know much about fishing."

"James showed me how to tickle them, and I tickled beautifully, but I never could flip them out of the water like he does."

"All right, you do the tickling, and I'll do the flipping," said Audrey, laughing. "But it all sounds like Greek to me."

"It's deep under that bridge," said Alison. "Roger, have you leave to go there?"

"If I can get a gwown up to come with me," said the small boy. "Audwy is a gwown up, isn't she?"

"Well, we'll see about it," said Alison, wisely. "Perhaps Audrey would rather do something else."

But Audrey, looking into those bright appealing eyes, felt she could not disappoint the child, and gave the required promise.

Then the sound of the motor horn was heard, and the children ran to the window, to see the return of the party.

Audrey gazed with interest at a stout kindly looking lady in a grey silk dress, with a toque trimmed with pansies, and carrying an enormous bouquet, which was taken respectfully by one of the servants, as she cautiously descended. Next came Lady Heversham, graceful and stately, and a strange lady, and lastly Gerard, looking cool and detached, and carrying a tall silk hat, which he deposited, with an air of relief, on the step, whence it was hastily removed by another footman, stifling his smiles, before the second motor came up.

"Gerard hates his topper," said Alison, laughing. "But he has to wear one, if there are any Royalties about. I expect he'll turn up soon. He asked this morning if you were coming today or tomorrow."

"Did he?" said Audrey, much gratified, as steps were heard outside, and Gerard strolled in.

"Well, Miss Denver," was his greeting, "have you got on a bit with your English history? I remember having some trouble with you, last time we met. You have grown, I think, or have I shrunk? I feel a decrease in the distance between us. Is it on your or my side, I wonder? Hullo, rabbits, why were you not in the hall making curtseys? H.R.H. condescended to

remember your petty existences, and commissioned me to purchase some suitable gifts for you. Now which hand will you have? Right or left?"

"Right," said Honor, and was rewarded by an enormous doll, and Pat, sneaking round behind him, clasped a Teddy bear of equally gigantic proportions, with a squeal of joy.

"I thought you had outgrown dolls," he said. "But you might lend them to Miss Denver, or your other little friends, to play with sometimes."

"Very kind of the Princess," said Alison. "Rabbits, you mustn't forget to thank her properly tonight. Well, how did the show go off?"

"Lord Windlesham, clad in a summer frock coat, and trousers of a light grey, was the cynosure of all eyes," said Gerard. "Behind him was observed the shrinking form of our august Patroness, who, aided by his benevolent and encouraging presence, declared the bazaar to be open. The distinguished company then made the round of the stalls, which were decorated in an unusually chaste and ornamental manner. The walls were draped with the seldom seen Union Jack, the rarity of which added to its charm, and wreaths of evergreens, a most original

touch, filled the intervening spaces. The élite of society were present, — Do you want any more?"

"No, that's enough," said Alison, while Audrey laughed at the familiar stream of nonsense.

"I ventured, in the noble name of charity, to purchase these two boxes of very inferior chocolates, to present to you two. You could get them twice as good at Fuller's for half the price."

But the girls were delighted with their beautiful handpainted boxes, and thanked him with enthusiasm.

He thereupon declared it was time to dress for dinner, and left the room backwards, bowing low at the door. "It is so difficult to get out of these habits, when one is only accustomed to the society of Royalty," he explained as he vanished.

Audrey made her bob to the Princess that evening, when the young ones were assembled in the State drawing-room, after their dinner, and the great people came in. She got a gracious smile in return, and Lady Heversham greeted her kindly, and welcomed her back to Dorincourt.

She looked fagged, and Marjorie, who came in last, after several stately-looking dames, looking

taller, and more beautiful, Audrey thought, than ever, solicitously pushed a cushion behind her mother's shoulders, and with a gesture, despatched the nearest rabbit for a footstool, before speaking to the girls.

Then she came across to them, and sinking into a chair, screened by a tall palm from the distinguished guest, said in an undertone to Alison, "Mother's dead beat. I shall be glad when all this fuss is over. I shall get Lady Adela to sing presently, to save her talking. Go to bed, rabbits, at once, if you've made your curtseys and said thank you, properly."

"But we haven't," said Pat, in a loud whisper. "We daren't go to bed. Gerard said we mustn't. But we don't like to interrupt."

"I'll tell Lady Adela," said Marjorie, rising, and Audrey, watching fascinated from her corner, admired the pretty manners of the little girls, as each, clasping her gift, they advanced to the great lady, and performed their little ceremony. Pat was rather pink, and Honor slightly out of breath, as they returned to their sisters, and slipped off quietly through the conservatory to bed.

Then Dick appeared, rather bored, having been pressed into the grown-up dinner, to make

the numbers even, and began an account, in a subdued voice, of his afternoon sport.

Audrey thought again, how many boys would have succumbed to the temptation of making the girls giggle, in the face of so much state and ceremony, but Dick never seemed to feel the impulse. It would have been very ill-bred, she knew, and respected him for refraining.

Presently, at a nod from Lady Heversham, Alison rose, and touching Audrey's arm, led her to make her curtsey before retiring. Audrey could only emulate the quiet ease of her friend, but her heart beat, and her cheeks flushed, as she inwardly prayed not to tumble over a foot-stool, or do anything to disgrace herself.

When the girls had crept out, Alison said, "Poor Mother and Marjorie. They've got to sit up till the Princess makes a move. Sometimes she doesn't go to bed till ever so late, and they nearly die of sleepiness. But she is very considerate really. She never expects us children to sit up."

"Well," said Audrey, "I feel awfully grand, just as if I had been presented. I am glad I got my new frock done in time. How did I do it?"

"Perfectly," said Alison. "But isn't it funny, she asked Mother if you were a relation. She

said there was such a strong family look. I can't see it myself. Your eyebrows are rather like Gerard's, but that's all. But it *is* funny, the way outsiders always notice it."

"Perfectly ridiculous," said Audrey, with sincerity. "I only wish it were true."

"Poor old Gerard," said Alison. "He will be glad when they've all gone. It was bad luck that Division coming today, and Father having to rush off for it. Did you see that stout fair man with the blue ribbon?"

The children had had a peep from the musician's gallery at the grand company below, and Audrey said she had.

"He wants to marry Marjorie," said Alison. "He's no end of a swell. The Marquis of Framlingham. His father's the Duke of Brighthelmstone."

"Dear me," said Audrey. "And won't she have him?"

"Can't abide the man," said Alison, confidentially. "I think he's rather a good sort myself, and goes in for politics, which I should like. But Marjorie's a regular country cousin. She likes old village women, and poultry, and all sorts of country things, and she won't look at anybody. She had five offers last season, I

know, but she says she won't marry till she finds someone exactly like Father."

"How interesting it all is," declared Audrey, with a sigh of pleasure. "It's exactly like living in a book. Who do you think you would like to marry?"

"A great traveller," said Alison, without any pause for consideration. She had evidently thought it all out. I want to see everywhere in the world — Egypt, and Japan, and Venice, and the Himalayas, and my husband must take me to them all."

"Even to the North Pole," suggested Audrey.

"Oh, that's too dull," said Alison. "All water, or at least ice. Besides, now that it's discovered all the romance is spoiled. I have rather a leaning to the South Pole. What would you like to do when you're married, Audrey?"

Audrey's eyes grew dreamy as she replied slowly, "I believe I would like to live in England, in an old home where my own people had always lived, and loved, and worked. I should like to be rich enough to be able to help everybody who needed help, and wise enough to know who really deserved it. I should like to have a splendid unstained family record to look back upon, and to hold up to my children for an

example. I should like a name that had been held by distinguished men who had done something to make their country greater, and the people round them happier. But there!" she broke off with a laugh. "If I marry at all, I shall probably marry a solicitor's clerk, and live in a villa at Upper Tooting."

"Don't," said Alison. "I like you when you talk like that. Don't spoil it. Good night, dear old thing. It is very nice having you with us again."

And the girls kissed and departed to their bedrooms.

CHAPTER X

A RESCUE

"Courage is on all hands considered as an essential of high character."

FROUDE.

THE next morning, Roger, fresh and clean in a white duck sailor suit, appeared to claim Audrey's promise to go "fissing."

Somewhat regretfully she gave up an entrancing game of tennis with Alison, Gerard, and Dick, to keep her promise.

She was somewhat consoled by the evident disappointment her defection caused the other three, though no one tried to dissuade her from keeping her word to "Bodge," as Roger appeared to be called in the nursery.

The rabbits appeared, all agog, with their fishing rods and baskets, and they all repaired to the scene of operations.

It was a hot, still July day; the trees, of a uniform shaded green, hung motionless in the

still air, and the stream looked clear and inviting as it swelled between its verdant banks, overhung with arching boughs. The path lay alongside the river, which had cut a deep course for itself, a good deal lower than the house, and was approached by several flights of steep steps, partly artificial and partly natural.

The stream turned and wound like a serpent, and it took the children twenty minutes to get to the old mill bridge, though when they arrived, Honor pointed out to Audrey the mellow castle battlements almost overhanging them, high above the tops of the trees.

It was a cool shady walk, and Audrey looked about her in admiration of its sylvan beauty.

The children, however, to whom it was all familiar, chattered incessantly, and told her where all the points of interest were. There was the boathouse, where there used to be four Rob Roy canoes kept, and the "others" had bumping races, until one day Dick upset Alison, and both had such a ducking, that the sport was forbidden from that day henceforward.

How the moorhens always laid under that bank, and how they had once found a deserted nest with twelve eggs in. How they had taken them up, and given them to Pat's bantam

hen to sit on. How in a short time she had hatched out twelve black little children with red noses. How they had brought them down to the river again in a basket, and how—in a tragic whisper—they had one and all ventured into the running water, and been drowned, and gone to heaven.

"But," said Audrey, "how strange that they couldn't swim."

"Mummy said their own mother would have taught them to, but Mrs. Bantam didn't know their language."

"Wouldn't it be funny," said Roger, "if Mummy had a whole lot of little black babies?"

"With red noses," put in Pat, "and couldn't talk their language?"

"Very funny," agreed Audrey, gravely.

Then there were the rapids, where they floated their boats, and where Bodge had lost a beautiful new submarine, because he would make it dive under a waterfall, though Pat had told him not to.

"I was too young," said Roger. "I didn't know. But Gigs gave me another, a much bigger one, and I've got it still. I'll show it you some day. Look, there's a wat, see, swimming across."

"Are there any otters here?" enquired Audrey.

"Yes, sometimes," said Pat. "The otter hunters are coming next week. I don't like them much, and we aren't allowed to go with them. We get so wet. But Gigs and Dick go out sometimes."

"I'm going when I'm big enough," said Roger. "Father says I may."

Audrey picked a big bunch of wild forget-me-nots and meadowsweet, and decorated the rabbits' hats. She made a posy for Roger, to wear in his buttonhole, and was quite sorry when the children pointed out the old mill bridge.

The water ran much deeper here, and swept under the pretty moss-grown piers with quite a rush, into an old mill race, which, though disused now, hurried past the rotting remnants of an antiquated water wheel, and rejoined the stream lower down, in a deep pool.

Below the bridge it widened out into a shallow sunny reach, and Roger pointed out an almost invisible browny-green object, quietly swinging with the current, among a tangle of water weeds, and hardly to be distinguished from them, as the "wipping twout" of his dreams.

Audrey's unaccustomed eyes had great difficulty in distinguishing him, but Roger had his shoes and socks off in a moment, and while the little girls were fitting their light rods together,

Roger crept out through the shallow water to a big flat stone overhanging the place, and beckoned Audrey to follow him.

Seeing what was expected of her, Audrey followed his example, and watched with interest the little chubby hand plunged in elbow deep, gradually approaching the unconscious fish, insinuating itself under it, and softly with a gentle rubbing motion, stroking and tickling it, while it seemed to be almost mesmerised by the sensation. But alas, as Roger had said, the deft twist of the hand, and dexterous turn of the wrist, known to the adept, were beyond his powers, and too rapid a movement of his gave the alarm, and the fish was gone, with one sweep of his tail, causing barely a ripple on the surface.

Roger withdrew his hand, and looked up with a tragic expression.

"Never mind," whispered Audrey. "There are plenty more. It was wonderful how you kept him there. I didn't know what you were going to do. Next time I shall know, and will help you."

"There's another place lower down," whispered Roger, "just below the bank there. But my arm is wather too short. P'raps if you held my legs, I could weach."

They paddled out of the water, and took up their new position. Here the bank shelved steeply over, and underneath its shelter Audrey saw three trout basking.

She and Roger lay flat on the bank, the little boy craning over to get his arm into the water.

Suddenly a rending noise was heard, the bank gave way beneath them, and Audrey felt herself being precipitated into the stream.

She clutched wildly at an old tree root that held, and by its aid pulled herself back into safety. For an instant she stood bewildered, then was recalled by a piercing shriek from Pat, above on the bridge.

"Oh, Roger, Roger, oh, he'll be drowned! Look, look, oh, save him, save him!"

The little boy had been flung into the current, which had rapidly drawn him into the mill race, and Audrey's horrified gaze caught a glimpse of a white shirt and curly head being irresistibly sucked under by the cruel waters.

With a cry she sprang into the river again. She had no time to take off anything, but being without shoes or stockings, and wearing only a light summer skirt, she was able to keep her head above water, and swam steadily with the stream, her whole heart in her eyes, looking for

the child, as the white blouse appeared and disappeared.

The old mill wheel was broken away, and the water did not turn it, but Audrey felt with a sick horror, with what a merciless blow that little curly head would come against the unyielding timber, if she could not reach him in time.

She felt the full power of the stream carry her on. She prayed with her whole heart and soul for some agency to arrest the child's progress, to check his rush to destruction.

And as if in answer to her petition, she saw a black snag of timber catch in the loose sailor blouse — bend — strain — and hold.

It was only for a moment, but Audrey was able to reach him, to clutch him, and though unable to check her downward rush, she was able to guide herself and the little lifeless form through the broken gap under the old wheel, and out into the deep pool below.

Once free of the current, she was able to swim to shore, still supporting the little boy, and to drag him out on the bank.

Though of course drenched and breathless, she had not been choked or forced to swallow much water, and after a moment of gasping and

panting, she began to manipulate the child's body, as she had been taught, to restore the life breath.

Poor little Roger, it did indeed look hopeless. His little face was blue, his eyes half closed, and his lips open and white. But Audrey worked steadily, drawing his arms over his head, and pressing them to his sides, till the little girls arrived, terrified and breathless, and she was able to give them instructions. Patricia ran sobbing towards home, and Honor to the nearest keeper's cottage, whence she speedily returned with a brown-faced young keeper, with blankets, brandy, and strong efficient aid.

By the time they arrived, Audrey, to her unspeakable joy, had detected faint signs of life, and a drop of brandy poured into the child's mouth was swallowed.

"He'll do now," said the man, with a deep breath of relief, and the trees and sky and river whirled round in a mad dance as Audrey fell back unconscious.

When she came to she was lying in bed. She opened her eyes, and wondered where she was. Then she became aware of a soft movement, and Lady Heversham's beautiful face, white and strained, bent over her.

"Thank God," she heard in a soft whisper, and the next moment a strange face, with a brown beard and kind keen eyes, appeared.

Audrey felt something on her head, and put up a feeble hand, to find herself bandaged.

A glass of something warm and pungent was put against her lips. She swallowed a mouthful, and suddenly recollection came back.

"Roger!" she said. "Oh, Roger, is he alive?"

"Yes, indeed, my darling, thanks to you," said Lady Heversham, and Audrey, amazed, saw that her eyes were wet with tears.

"But I don't understand," she said. "Why am I in bed?"

"You cut your head against something," said the doctor's voice. "It knocked some of the sense out of it, but it's coming back now. You've been a good brave child, but you mustn't talk any more now. Roger's as right as a trivet, but you must try to get to sleep, and then you shall hear all about it."

"I —feel—sleepy," murmured Audrey dreamily, and closing her eyes obediently, dropped into a deep slumber.

"That's all right," whispered the doctor, signalling Lady Heversham to come out of the room with him.

"She'll soon come round now," he said. "There is slight concussion, but I see no unfavourable symptoms. Leave her to sleep till she wakes naturally. Nurse can sit in the next room, and have some strong soup ready when she wakes. A day or two in bed, and no conversation, is all she wants. A plucky child. I'll call in again this afternoon."

Lady Heversham went on into the schoolroom, where she found an agitated party awaiting the doctor's verdict.

Audrey's continued unconsciousness had alarmed them a good deal. When the rescue party from the Castle had arrived they had found Honor and the keeper at their wit's end, for though Roger was slowly coming back to life, Audrey could not be restored by any means known to them.

The blow on her head must have been given by the old mill wheel, as they were whirled under it, and had bled profusely, but she had not noticed it in her intense pre-occupation over Roger. When the strain was relieved, the injury had asserted itself, and her state of insensibility had lasted some hours.

Gerard and Marjorie were in the schoolroom with the children, all waiting with anxious faces.

When their mother gave them the good news, there was a general cry of relief and thankfulness, tongues were unloosed, and everybody began to talk at once.

Honor and Pat, as the only eye-witnesses, enjoyed their importance, and described over and over again, how Audrey and Roger were lying on the bank, and how it had slipped in, and Roger was thrown into the deep water and carried down, that Audrey had scrambled back, but the moment she saw what had happened had sprung in again. The frantic race downstream, the providential snag that had caught the child, Audrey's presence of mind in seizing him, and guiding them both through the gap into the calm water beyond, was told again and again, while Lady Heversham, usually so reserved, cried for pure thankfulness, and everybody's eyes were wet.

Alison was the first to recover herself, and to discover that in the excitement nobody had had any lunch, and that it was nearly four o'clock. She rang the bell and ordered tea, which everybody discovered was exactly what they wanted, and soon restored them all to commonsense and calmness.

CHAPTER XI

"A PASTORAL PLAY"

"Come sit down, every mother's son, and rehearse your parts."

SHAKESPEARE.

"No," said Gerard, firmly, "I entirely decline to take Orlando. He is distinctly not my style. Besides, think of making love to Marjorie. The idea is too far fetched."

"Well, what will you be?" said Marjorie, with resignation. "You must have a decent part, you know."

"Of course it would be awkward if the audience rose and cleared the stage," he agreed. "Well, I don't mind Touchstone. Robin Adair can be Orlando. That'll make his young heart beat."

"Oh, no," said Marjorie hastily, turning rather pink. "I don't think he's good enough."

"Not good enough, and he a leading light in

the A.D.C. Don't be hypercritical, my child. It doesn't suit your appearance."

"Well, make somebody else Rosalind then. I should feel too silly in those ——."

"Divided skirts," suggested Gerard. "Well, if he isn't on the stage, he'll be in the audience, you know. Of course we might cast Pat for Rosalind, but everybody else is suited."

"*Are* we?" exclaimed Alison. "The first I've heard of it."

"Don't give me a good part," implored Audrey. "I've never acted in my life, and should simply expire with terror."

"Your part was written for you, and settled by the author, three hundred years ago," said Gerard. "I'll read the names if you like."

"Mr. Whatshisname is the Duke Frederick. Father takes the banished Duke. Melancholy Jaques can be Marjorie's other flame, Framlingham."

"Much too fat," objected Marjorie.

"My good child, are you stage manager or am I?" demanded Gerard. "Of course you can have him for Orlando, if you like. Very well, then. You can sit down."

"Lilian Adair takes Celia. Alison, Phebe. Miss Denver, of course, Audrey. The rabbits

take the pages — and must learn to sing in tune. William and Corin and Charles and Adam, and all that lot, will be offered for competition among the youths of the neighbourhood. We shall have one or two stopping here also. Jack Fraser and Malcolm. I believe Colonel Adair acts too. We'll ask him.

"Now this table has grown remarkably hard, and my brain requires a rest. Let's go and eat peaches. Remember, there's no appeal from the stage manager's decision. Miss Denver, put down that Shakespeare. You'll have a clear week to learn three sentences in, and the worse you do it, the more lifelike you'll be."

"Haven't you any more girls' parts?" said Alison. "I believe the Adairs have some visitors coming."

"There are no feminine parts left," said Gerard. "Careless of Shakespeare, but so it is. If Alison would take Charles or Adam, one of them could do Phebe."

"Oh, do let me give up my part," begged Audrey. "I know I shall make a mess of it."

"If you say another word, I'll cast you for Rosalind," said Gerard with decision, and Audrey, feeling he was capable of anything, collapsed.

"We'll come and see the stage, when we've

done eating peaches," said Marjorie, as the party trooped out of the schoolroom, where they had been consulting.

There was to be a great junketing on the occasion of Gerard's coming of age, and among other festivities, a pastoral play was to be acted. Scenes from "As You Like It" had been selected, and as there was a good deal of dramatic talent in the family, and some of them had acted in it before, it seemed possible that the pretty comedy would not be too much burlesqued.

The exciting episode of last week had passed without any lasting injury to either of the performers in it, and Audrey had resumed her place in the family, but, as she felt, on a different footing.

She no longer considered Lady Heversham "aloof" or alarming. She found the tender mother heart under the stately manners, and had felt herself drawn in and enveloped in the warm family affection that characterised all the Dorincourts.

She had found herself quite a heroine when she had come downstairs again, and poor Audrey, deprived as she had been all her life of praise, or love, or even the feeling that she was welcome

in the world, had glowed and expanded in the atmosphere of approval and admiration.

Lord Heversham couldn't make enough of her. Lady Heversham had nursed and petted her back to health, as if she had been her own daughter, and Audrey found herself included in her nightly habit of visiting each child in bed, with the goodnight kiss, and comfortable tucking up, which at first had made her cry herself to sleep with pure pleasure.

Dick and Alison regarded her with the greatest respect, and the children fairly adored her.

Gerard had not said much, but his keen eyes were turned upon her oftener than she knew, and his cool speeches were tinged with a chivalrous admiration that all their apparent flippancy could not wholly disguise.

So Audrey was very happy.

Her visit would naturally have terminated before the date of Gerard's coming of age, but she found the idea of leaving was scouted as simply inhuman by the entire party, and after a very half-hearted resistance, had agreed to pass the rest of the holidays with them. They were going to Scotland at the end of August, and she was to join them there.

Presently she found herself walking with Gerard, who had somehow managed to detach her from the rest of the party, and had guided her into the fruit pergola. This was a covered walk, where pear and apple trees were trained over arches, affording complete shelter from either weather or observation.

"Look here, Miss Denver," he said, "we've got a little bit together, you know. We ought to rehearse it now and then. Would it be a great bore to you to make a regular arrangement about it? I shall never get all these irresponsible young people together if we don't make some rules."

"All right," said Audrey. "Tell me when it would suit you."

"I understand you like a swim in the middle of the day," he said, "and possibly you consider some meals are necessary. How would this time suit you? Six o'clock in the fruit pergola, until further notice. Bring your book, and we'll say our lessons together."

She assented, and they paced the rest of the walk in silence. Then Gerard spoke again. "I haven't said much, but you mustn't think that, like the parrot, I haven't thought the more. Miss Denver, I don't think it's possible to put

into words, but we all feel that your splendid courage and presence of mind saved a tragedy that would have shadowed our lives for ever. My mother's heart would have been half broken, I believe, and I am sometimes superstitiously afraid that we are almost too happy, too prosperous, that there must be some cloud in store, to balance all these years of sunshine, to bring up the average rainfall, in fact," he added, with a return to his light manner.

Audrey replied seriously. "But surely you haven't been perfectly happy all your lives."

"My parents certainly had rather a hard start in life," he said. "My father was a younger son, or rather a son of a younger sister, and was precious hard up. My dear mother was no heiress, and they married rather against advice. They lived on love and a crust for several years, and had a good deal of anxiety. I can dimly remember the change my father's unexpected succession made in our affairs. Luckily my great uncle was a saving man, and also found hæmatite iron on some of his north country property, or I suppose we should still be in a tight place. The rents of this property don't do more than pay for its upkeep, in these cheerful days for landowners. But the iron

makes it all right, and so we have a penny or two to spare, though we are so thick on the ground. If poor Uncle Hugh had not died when he did, or had left an heir, I suppose my father would have still been a barrister, and not a very successful one, or popped into a County Court Judgeship, or such like. I should have been a far more useful member of society, earning my bread in some more or less menial capacity. Dick, I suppose, at a grammar school receiving a far better education than he does at Eton, and Marjorie teaching the kiddies, and turning their frocks. Oh, we should be very hard up."

"I know what that is," said Audrey. "It is pretty bad, but some people do it worse than others. I often think my cousins would be much more comfortable if they would do things differently. But they have been brought up so, and they can't help it, poor things."

"Where do you get your experience, Miss Denver?" asked Gerard. "I don't detect any white hairs, such as should accompany such words of wisdom. But I understand they make wonderful hair dyes now-a-days."

"Well," said Audrey, laughing, "I stay a lot with school friends, you know. One girl belongs to very poor people, but awfully nice, and they

have a dear little clean cottage, with one servant, and they spare enough to send her to Miss Fenwick's. She helps with the teaching there. They have everything so nice, and make you so comfortable. But some people are always uncomfortable, and say it's because they are poor. It's only because they are stupid."

"Hear, hear," said Gerard, softly. "And, of course, that is a failing that we cannot sympathise with."

"Let's go back," said Audrey. "I'm perfectly starving to get at my part."

"No hurry," said Gerard, lazily. But she was not to be dissuaded, and ran off, leaving the young man alone.

He sat down on a garden seat, drew out his cigarette case, and gazed at it without seeing it for several minutes. Then he laughed to himself, took out a cigarette, lighted it, and settled down to a smoke.

CHAPTER XII

"A STARTLING DISCOVERY"

"This accident and flood of fortune,
So far exceed all instance, all discourse,
That I am ready to distrust mine eyes."

SHAKESPEARE.

THE pastoral play was duly rehearsed, and as usual the minor parts caused far more agitation to the actors, and trouble to the authorities, than the important ones.

Marjorie was a capital actress, and had done the part before. Orlando had had plenty of experience, and whatever his private bliss might have been, was much too well bred to allow it to appear, so only an occasional tremble in his pleasant voice betrayed him to the initiated.

Rosalind's "doublet and hose" were cut in a demurely decorous style, and were extremely becoming.

Lilian Adair made a sweet and unsophisticated Celia, and was deeply relieved that she had not

to act with Gerard, who exercised a paralysing effect upon her intellect.

The part of Oliver was taken by one George Malcolm, an Oxford friend of Gerard's, and "a littery gent," as Dick called him.

Our Audrey learned her few lines with assiduous care, and looked forward to the great day with a mixture of terror and joy.

The sloping lawn on the west side of the house was chosen for the stage, and a large marquee was erected to hold the audience.

Screens covered with evergreens were put up for the exits and entrances, and the actors were able to dress in the house, the battlements and turrets of which made a picturesque if rather incongruous background for the Forest of Arden, though very appropriate for the scenes in front of the Duke's palace.

The indoor scenes were left out, or merged, and the big cedar tree made a grateful shade under which the banished Duke entertained his sylvan court.

Dick had absolutely refused to take any part, being at that self-conscious age when our every action is of supreme importance, and one's own individuality the pivot upon which society turns.

But Lady Heversham was thankful, she said, to have one member of the family who was not stage struck, and welcomed Dick's assistance in receiving and marshalling the company to their places.

As Gerard had foreseen, there had been no difficulty in collecting enough local talent to fill the minor parts, and all promised well.

The sun rose on a cloudless autumn day, and the gardens looked a perfect blaze of colour. The only flaw in the weather, as Lilian said, was its absolute windlessness, so that all the gay flags hung motionless against their staffs, and might as well not have been there at all.

The red and white stripes of the various tents, however, contrasted with the August green of the trees, and supplied the necessary touch of colour.

Audrey did not appear in the first part at all, and standing behind one of the leafy screens, listened with entranced interest, as if she had not heard it rehearsed a hundred times before.

Bob Adair began Orlando's soliloquy with some nervousness, but when Oliver came in the two soon warmed up to their quarrel.

Harold Adair, who had been pressed into the very small part of Dennis, was taken with stage

fright, and being pushed on by Lilian, merely stood with chattering teeth, endeavouring to explain the presence of Charles the Wrestler. Orlando took pity on him, and put the words into his mouth, after which he fled in an agony of blushes, to be sardonically congratulated by Dick, who had come "behind."

The wrestling scene was a great success, the burly Charles, a son of the Vicar, having stipulated that a mattress should be prepared for him, covered with green moss, upon which, Orlando, with a little rather transparent manœuvring, laid him neatly on his back, amidst the cheers of the audience and jeers of his kindred.

Then Rosalind and Celia, splendid in mediæval court dress, entered, soon followed by Gerard as Touchstone. His entrance was greeted with such a round of applause that a less cool-headed person might have been put out, but he merely favoured his audience with a mediæval caper in character, which made a very effective entrance, though unpremeditated.

Lord Heversham, as the banished Duke, had taken upon him such a portly presence, in his furred robes, false hair, and drooping moustache, slightly touched with grey, that Audrey hardly knew him, and it took the audience a minute or

two, among an agitated flutter of playbills, to recognise him.

The scene in the palace had perforce to take place out of doors, and the next scene had to be placarded, in true Shakespearean style, as "The Forest of Arden."

But the removal of the Duke's pavilion, the wrestling lists and the bright carpets, made the scene quite sufficiently different, and certainly the company assembled there found no fault.

Gerard came behind in his motley, stifling his bauble bells with a stern gesture, and threw himself all along the grass at Audrey's feet.

"It's wonderful easy to be a fool," he quoted. "A man may be a fool and not know it."

"How well they received you," said Audrey. "They quite interrupted the performance."

"Oh, well, of course I am a jolly fine fellow," he said. "At least we have carefully educated our friends to think so, and it is difficult to alter the habits of a lifetime, especially on an occasion like this. I hope you also remembered to clap me, Audrey — I crave pardon, Miss Denver."

"I think I was too busy watching," she said. "I never thought of it."

"I missed it," he said sadly. "Remember next time, please."

"I believe next time is on the stage," said Audrey. "Oh dear, my heart gets cold and turns over with a flop when I think of it."

"Well, you can't be worse than Dennis," said Gerard consolingly. "And the more you blush and stammer, the more you'll be like the part."

Then Rosalind, in her boy's dress, called forth tumultuous plaudits, and her pretty, shy manner was so attractive that Gerard touched Audrey to observe Orlando, who, leaning up against another screen at the opposite wing, could be distinctly seen to change colour and drop his scroll. "Poor chap," said Gerard. "The sweet youth's in love."

"Poor Captain Adair," said Audrey with sympathy. "I think this is rather hard on him."

"Much harder on Framlingham," said Gerard darkly.

"Oh, do you really think that?" said Audrey, with breathless interest.

"My good child — I beg pardon, my good Miss Denver," said Gerard, "my opportunities have been limited, and my experience small, but my intuition is infallible, and my instinct never wrong."

"Oh, well," laughed Audrey, "I suppose then there's no more to be said. I say, there's your cue."

The songs sounded very charming to the accompaniment of a harp and flutes, and Amiens' song was loudly encored. Lord Framlingham, though not as slim as he had been, looked melancholy enough as Jaques, and if he uttered his wise saws and modern instances in rather a wooden manner, Audrey felt so much for him that she hardly observed it, and attributed possibly a more heart-broken cadence to his voice than he himself was conscious of.

Orlando's part became more and more sentimental as the play went on, and Marjorie, alternately grave and gay, simple and fresh, full of delightful coquetry and lovable humour, seemed the very incarnation of Rosalind.

Touchstone was a good deal more on the stage in the second act, and then Audrey perceived that her turn had come. When Gerard, jingling in his cap and bells, led her on to the stage, before thousands of eyes, she was scarlet with confusion, and her tongue tripped so over her first speech that the audience, taking it for simulated, not real shyness, cheered her loudly, which gave her a chance of recovering herself.

Touchstone's gay, serio-comic banter was so like his usual manner with her, that she gave him back her rustic retorts with spirit, and was quite sorry when it was over.

So the pretty play wore to its close. The shadows lengthened across the green velvet turf, and the golden splendour of the sunset sky lit up the faces of the actors and their graceful garb, till the audience felt the glamour of the poet-wizard envelop them, and could hardly believe that the scene before them was not real, and they themselves, with their prosaic twentieth century costume, thoughts, and preoccupations, were but the shadows of a dream.

But at last it was over, all the stage lovers were made happy, and the onlookers, with an universal sigh of regret, rose to their feet to award the actors the only thanks in their power for their sojourn in the enchanted land of Romance.

Audrey, with her eyes full of tears, found herself drawn on by Gerard, in response to repeated calls for Touchstone, in spite of her holding back, and protesting that they didn't want her.

Lady Heversham heard observations behind her of, "Who is Audrey? They might be brother

and sister." "She must be a relation." "A sweet looking girl. What name did you say?" "Denver." "Denver." "I wonder who she is. I don't know the name at all." "What a wonderful amateur actor Lord Windlesham is. He quite makes one feel that he is in earnest."

Lady Heversham, struck by a sudden thought, glanced rather anxiously at the young couple, as they bowed and retired. But she was reassured by Gerard's expression of slightly ironical detachment, and said to herself, "Nonsense, a child like that. It couldn't be. A boy at Gerard's age generally falls in love with a woman of forty. But we can look upon her as a dear daughter, without that complication," and her hand fell caressingly upon the curly pate of little Roger, who was as usual closely attached to her skirts.

The performers came out in their stage dresses, and fell upon the cold "collation" prepared for them with a very matter of fact avidity.

But Audrey was still in the land of dreams, and could hardly bear the loud and cheerful talk around her, and though she found her devoted Touchstone proffering every kind of refreshment, solid and liquid, she slipped away, and running up to her own room, sat down on the wide chintz-covered window seat, and gazing, chin in hand,

over the open blue distance, tried to live it all over again, and recall the sensations of that wonderful afternoon.

Her window looked out on the southern side of the house, and the gay company were all clustered round the tea tents where the band of the R.A. were discoursing sweet music, so the beautiful prospect before her was empty of humanity.

But one marquee was pitched in sight of the window, and as Audrey gazed dreamily at it, a light breeze from the south rose, and lifted the light folds of the flag that drooped above it.

As the banner blew out, something familiar in its emblazonment caught Audrey's eye.

Where had she seen that design before? A knight's helmet wreathed in laurel. Below a shield, supported by two unsheathed swords, bearing a couchant lion, clasping in his paws an earl's coronet. Below again, a scroll, with the defiant motto — "Wake me not."

Where had she seen that before?

In a blinding flash it came to her. It was the coat-of-arms she had deciphered on her dead father's signet ring.

CHAPTER XIII

PERPLEXITY

"But now I am cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in
To saucy doubts and fears."

SHAKESPEARE.

AUDREY sat quite still for a long time, she hardly knew how long.

Instinct told her that she was right in her strong conviction.

Commonsense made a feeble effort to assert itself. "My good child," she heard herself saying in Gerard's manner, "how you do jump to conclusions. The fact that your father had a signet ring with the Heversham arms on it, does not exactly prove that he was related to the family. He might have come by it in fifty ways, by gift or purchase, or exchange. The fact that his name was Hugh, and that he died on the same day as Hugh Alured Dorincourt, is a coincidence that proves nothing. A great deal would have to be ascertained and verified, and

no lawyers would accept such very sketchy evidence."

On the other side, there was the curious family likeness, that Audrey had seen and secretly rejoiced in, and above all, said Romance, surely blood is thicker than water. Why should you have fallen in love so instantly with these people? Granted that they are charming people, and that this is a singularly pleasant house to stay in. But what put you, a little humble schoolgirl, brought up in suburban surroundings, entirely unused to society, unaccustomed to the luxuries of wealth and the conventions of rank, so entirely at your ease? You were at home with them all from the beginning, and they with you.

Commonsense and Logic were hopelessly outtrumped by their two opponents, Intuition and Romance.

Now what was Audrey to do?

She began to picture to herself the results of her discovery. She thought she should first tell Gerard, who would inform his father. Audrey, though young, was wise enough to know that legal forms must be gone through, even if there were no opposition to her claim. From what she knew of the family, she was sure they would not dispute it or endeavour to support their position,

by any legal technicalities, if they were convinced of her relationship.

She thought of her proofs. The marriage certificate, her mother's and father's letters. It did not occur to her that her father having married under a false name might make a difficulty.

Audrey had lived so much alone, all her life, that she had not been much in the habit of taking counsel with others, but had worked out her own problems by herself.

Little problems about lessons, of graver questions, of rights and wrongs among her schoolfellows, relative merits of public people, and historical characters. She had never talked things over much, except with her kind and sensible mistress, Miss Fenwick.

But instinctively Audrey felt that this was not a question for anyone outside the family.

The mere idea of consulting her uncle made her shrink. How well she knew what he would say. How utterly ridiculous, even insane, would he consider the idea that there should be any doubt in her mind as to her proper course.

"The Countess of Heversham, in her own right." Unconsciously Audrey's head raised itself a little higher. Hers was the noble

heritage she had so honoured. All that splendid ancestry was hers. Their blood, the blood of statesmen, of warriors, of leaders of men, and women too, of honour, courage, and lofty principles, ran in her veins. Could she, the representative of that noble line, be worthy of it?

The thought made her eyes sparkle and her cheek glow. She rose and began pacing the room with quick steps. What would happen, she thought, supposing her claim allowed.

She would reign here, here in beautiful stately Dorincourt. The historic house, the exquisite garden, the stately park, were all hers. Hers by right. She had only to put out her hand to take them.

Then came the consideration. What would the Dorincourts do? She thought of Gerard's description of his father, as a rather struggling barrister, perhaps with luck a County Court Judge in a provincial town. Lady Heversham, despoiled of her state, her velvets and sables, the Dorincourt jewels that she wore so gracefully, and adorned in the wearing. Audrey tried to imagine her on foot in muddy lanes, clad in rough tweed, or driving in omnibuses.

Poor Gerard, working in a lawyer's office, or

even finding it hard to get work. She was sure he would make no fuss. He would laugh, and set himself to do his duty, but it would be hard for him to begin at the beginning, and, oh dear, it was all very difficult.

Dick might go on at school, but Audrey knew that was an expensive business, and the vision of dear Marjorie, teaching or working, "turning the rabbits' frocks," as Gerard had said, was a grievous idea.

Of course it would all be very useful, and no doubt they would make themselves happy, and be as brave as possible, but Audrey could not bear the thought of it for them.

She was used to it, the narrow suburban life, with its petty round of small duties, and second-rate pleasures, the society of limited intellects, the sordid cares of life, that seemed to shut out great aspirations and wide horizons.

She knew that the Dorincourts were all well educated. That they had never been mere idlers. Each child had its allotted round of duties. Their position had never been allowed to make them vain, or useless.

As Gerard had said — how many of Gerard's words came back to her — his father looked upon his position as a trust, and had always

been prepared to render an account of his stewardship. How few would be as prepared. The picture rose before her of their happy, useful, beautiful family life, with their splendid background; and she thought it would be like destroying a priceless work of art, or defacing some exquisite scene of natural beauty, to disturb them. What was she to do? What was she to do?

Just then a knock on the door interrupted her perplexed musings. "Come in," she said mechanically, and Alison entered.

"Why, Audrey," she began, "have you been here all the time? We have simply exhausted ourselves with searching for you. The people have nearly all gone, except the Adairs and their friends. We are going to have a little dancing. There is to be an 'As You Like It' Lancers, and Touchstone says he must have his Audrey. Mother says we must stop at nine and have some supper, instead of regular dinner. We had tea so lately that we felt we couldn't bear the sight of food before. It is half-past six now. Do come down. Why, Audrey, you haven't been crying? What's the matter, dear thing? Nothing wrong, is there? Oh, Audrey, don't."

For poor Audrey, exhausted by conflicting

emotions, and fairly worn out by the various excitements of the day, had broken down, to her intense mortification, and was sobbing on Alison's shoulder, trying to explain between half hysterical paroxysms, that it was nothing, she was only a great goose. There was nothing the matter, only it had all been so beautiful, and they had all been so kind.

Alison saw she was overdone, applied eau-de-cologne and cold water, and comforting words till Audrey had controlled herself, and pressed her to lie down and not bother about the dancing.

"But the Lancers," said Audrey. "I must come for that."

"Never mind about that," said Alison. "I daresay they have forgotten all about them by now."

"I'm all right again now," said Audrey. "Do I look an object?"

"Not a bit," said Alison, honestly. "You look rather jolly with your cheeks all flushed and your eyes bright. Don't come down if you feel shaky, and I'll get you some sal volatile or something from Marjorie."

"Oh, no, I want to come," said Audrey. She felt she could not be left alone with her own reflections any longer.

So the two girls descended to the hall, which was cleared for dancing, being of a more manageable size than the ballroom.

They were greeted with joy, and the Shakespearean Lancers were quickly arranged.

Audrey still felt rather dreamlike, but Gerard, after a quick glance at her, divined some kind of emotion, and made himself so agreeable to his other neighbour, that Audrey was left undisturbed, and was soon laughing and dancing as gaily as anybody.

The Adairs had brought a large party, and there were some twenty guests at Dorincourt, so it was quite a ball, to Audrey's eyes, though at an unusual hour.

"In future," Gerard said to her, "we will arrange for all balls to begin at six and end at nine. Think what a relief to the chaperones and what an improvement to our complexions. We should all grow young again."

"What a capital Touchstone Lord Windlesham made," said Lilian to Audrey, as they were sitting together later. "He is so amusing. My father says he was better than any professional Touchstone he has ever seen. But I did pity you, acting with him."

"Why? I liked it," said downright Audrey.

"I can't think why he makes me feel such an idiot," said Lilian. "I think it is that one never knows when he is in earnest. Oh, did you ever see anything so killing as Harold? He stood there, simply mouthing and jibbering, till I thought I should have died of laughter. I wonder if the audience could hear us."

"Lucky he had such a short part," said Audrey. "He looks very jolly now, he seems to have got over it all right."

"We shall never get him on the stage again," observed Lilian. "Bob is so awfully fond of it, he made him try, but Harold says now he's going to be a missionary, instead."

"He doesn't look much like a missionary at this moment," said Audrey. Harold was holding a sponge cake in his mouth, and encouraging the rabbits to jump for it.

Audrey had plenty of partners, but was much honoured when she found courtly Colonel Adair requesting the honour of a dance.

"I don't often get the chance of dancing with a real live heroine," he said, smiling down upon her. "I have just been hearing all about it from Lady Heversham. Where did you learn to swim so well?"

So Audrey launched out into a description of

her happy school life, her expressive face sparkling with animation, till Colonel Adair said suddenly. "Pardon me, but are you related to our kind hosts, Miss Denver? I catch such a likeness to Heversham, when you smile."

Audrey's heart gave a jump, and she lost her presence of mind for an instant. Just then the silvery jingle of Touchstone's bells was heard, and Gerard strolling up, remarked, "Supper is ready, Audrey. We are to go in in pairs. Colonel, I'm sorry to deprive you of your partner, but you see this is a poor thing, but mine own."

CHAPTER XIV

COMING OF AGE

"A proper man as one shall see in a summer's day."
SHAKESPEARE.

AUDREY did not sleep much that night, and when she did, jostling and confused dreams came to her, affording little rest. Lord Heversham under the cedar tree, holding his court of banished and dispossessed lords. She, in the furred robes and coronet of the usurping Duke, finding, such is the sardonic humour of dreams, the robes so short, that she was terrified at the idea that her ankles, clad in the red and yellow of Touchstone's motley garb, should be seen, and her chief anxiety being to prevent other people noticing them, by an elaborate affectation of unconsciousness.

Lady Heversham, in cap and apron, with a red bow in her hair, after the style of Violet of Brixton, swimming downstream in frantic

pursuit of Mr. Baxter, who dived and reappeared carrying in his mouth the fateful signet ring.

The golden sunset lighting up the floating banners with their incriminating coat-of-arms, and Audrey's own desperate attempts to prevent their being recognised, and clasping her arms round one, only to find the next one flaunting open before the eyes of countless multitudes, whose clapping sounded like the waves of the sea. Surely it was the sea. Yes, here was Touchstone. What was he saying? "A merry night for swimming, Audrey. Let us swim together." Then a huge black wave, rising, rising, over the tops of the trees, its curling white crest dimly visible in the electric light. It towered sky high, while she and Gerard crouched dumbly, hand in hand, too paralysed to move. It turned over, and fell with a thundering crash, when Audrey woke to find herself trembling in every limb and half dead with terror.

She switched on the light at her bed head, and looked at the bright little room. Though it had the unfamiliar expression, as of one waked out of sleep, that one always observes if one lights up at dead of night, the cheerful chintzes and flowery wall paper restored her to a sense of reality.

She got up, slipped into her dressing-gown,

and went to the window. Drawing aside the curtains, she looked out into the night.

She looked up at the sky, sprinkled with God's diamond dust, the trees standing like solid shadows, without a leaf stirring, the fountain in its marble basin sunk in slumber, the clear dark water shining with the reflection of the stars, like a bottomless shaft sunk through the earth, and showing a peep of another firmament below.

There was no moon, but the stars were so brilliant that it was easy to see the outlines of the garden, the paths, the flower borders, the marble terrace balustrade, the dim park beyond, and the gleam of the lake behind the trees.

The window was wide open, and Audrey leant on the sill, her chin on her hands, thinking, thinking, thinking.

There was no question of injuring or benefiting anyone but herself, she thought. Her dead parents needed no rehabilitation. Her father had voluntarily renounced the title, her mother had been ignorant of the real rank and name of her husband.

"Poor father," thought Audrey pitifully. "How dreadful for him to think he had sacrificed all this in a fit of anger. And to believe he had killed his brother. *Poor* father. But he must

know all about it now. Oh, how I wish I had somebody to ask."

Then it came to her that she had, and slipping to her knees, she laid her perplexities before a Higher Authority.

Presently a sense of peace came to her. Why need she worry and trouble about this now? There was no hurry in the matter. She had always been in the same position, only by the accident of finding the letters and the ring had she become aware of it.

She could not interrupt the festivities to-morrow. She could hardly imagine anything more ill-timed than such an announcement at such a time. Even if she told only the family, how could they go on as if nothing had happened. She thought of the blow it would be to them. They would feel they had been masquerading as impostors before the world.

Gerard, with his debonair manner, his delightful dry little speeches, his courteous hospitable welcome to all, how would he take it?

Could anybody be expected to like the claimant even if she had been a familiar friend before.

Would it be possible for human nature not to resent such a position. Audrey could not face the idea of cold looks or forced politeness from

them, and, with a great sigh, finally determined to let the whole thing slide for the present, and perhaps put it as a hypothetical case before Miss Fenwick when she saw her again.

The relief of having arrived at a conclusion of some sort was so great, that she got back into bed and soon sank into a peaceful sleep.

When she was called in the morning, she woke feeling that something extraordinary had happened, but could not at first remember what it was. Her confused dreams and her waking perplexities seemed so merged in her mind, that she could hardly disentangle them.

As she dressed she was suddenly startled by the loud and jocund peal of the village church bells, ringing their joyous congratulations to the heir of Heversham.

From her window Audrey could see the tall triumphal arch erected at the entrance, and a series of smaller ones streaming with flags and mottoes, standing at intervals down the long drive, as it curved in and out between the green undulations of the park.

She could see the words on the nearest:

"Long live our noble earl and his heir."

A village sentiment, but as Audrey knew, inspired by sincere affection and no lip service.

The bells clashed and jangled merrily. The sky was still unclouded, but today a light breeze stirred the folds of bunting, and Audrey saw the significant coat-of-arms repeated on more than one banner.

"Fancy if I hadn't been alone when it flashed upon me," she thought. "I should have been so startled that I might have said or done something idiotic, and given the whole show away."

She put on her best frock, a dainty affair of soft white silk and lace, with a broad white satin sash, draped down one side. It had been made by Alison's maid, and the two girls were to be dressed alike.

She looked approvingly at the big white hat, with its curling ostrich feather, the gift of Lady Heversham, and took up and fondled her last and most precious possession.

This was a finely-chased gold locket, heart shaped, with one fine diamond in its centre. It opened on delicate hinges, and on one side was an exquisite miniature portrait of little Roger, with his saucy blue eyes and chestnut curls, and on the other, engraved on a gold plate, the words,

"In loving remembrance. July 25th, 1909."

As she looked at it, the date struck her. "A curious coincidence," she thought. July the 25th was the date of the death of that Hugh Alured Dorincourt, whose memorial tablet she saw every Sunday from her place in church, and also of that Hugh Denver, whose daughter she was.

Lord and Lady Heversham had presented this gift to her a week before, with heartfelt words of gratitude on his side, and a warm motherly kiss on hers, which had been almost more precious to Audrey than the graceful gift itself.

She hung it now on its fine gold chain, and put it round her neck. Marjorie's Christmas present, the long white gloves, had been saved for this occasion also, and Audrey felt that she really looked nicer than she ever had in her life before.

Now, however, the hat and gloves were left behind, and as the gong sounded for breakfast Audrey started downstairs, regarding her neat silk ankles and buckled shoes with approbation, as they stepped down the shining stairs.

Alison came out of her room at the same moment, full of excitement and pleasure, and joined her friend on the landing.

"I say," she said, "isn't it jolly to hear the bells? Don't they make you feel ready to fly out of your skin for joy?"

"I don't know," said Audrey a little soberly. "Joy bells always seem a little sad to me, somehow. I suppose because it has always been other people's joy."

"But today it's all of our joy," said Alison cheerfully. "Isn't it delicious of it to be so fine? How pretty the frock is, and you've got your locket on, I see. Let me look at the precious lamb again."

Audrey opened the little heart, and Alison looked hard at the bonny little face inside. Then she gave Audrey an impulsive kiss, while her honest eyes became a little moist.

"There," she said. "Don't let us get into the doleful dumps on Gerard's birthday. But you know, ducky, it was a wonderful bit of luck our picking you up like that, you know."

Audrey wondered, as she returned the kiss, how far Alison's warm-hearted speech was true.

They entered the sunny cedar parlour together. The early arrivals were breakfasting at the round table in the east window, where the August sun was already so hot that the green and white sunblinds were drawn down outside.

Smaller tables were laid at intervals down the long room, as was the Heversham custom, so that guests might choose their own hours. The stately butler and tall footmen, to whom Audrey was now quite accustomed, officiated at the sideboard, with the tea and coffee equipages, and an imposing array of hot and cold dishes.

There was a large house party staying at Dorincourt for Gerard's birthday, but Audrey had not made acquaintance with many of them. The Duchess of Brighthelmstone, Lord Framlingham's mother, she rather liked. She was a little dry, autocratic old lady, with a very false chestnut front, and extremely gay caps over it. She had never had any particular looks, as she said herself, but made up by a sufficiency of brains. Her bright beady eyes never missed anything, and she dressed like a decayed governess.

The Duke was absent, grousing in Scotland, but there was another Duke, Gerard's godfather. He was a lean scholarly person, whose recreation was conchology, and whose life interest centred in Greek mathematics.

Lady Heversham's sister, the Aunt Honor where the children had been staying when Audrey first met them, was an older, greyer,

stiffer edition of Lady Heversham, and much more alarming. Lord and Lady Coalport, with two pretty, fair, exceedingly well dressed daughters, were among the guests, and there were various young men, with very straight backs and very short hair, who were vaguely spoken of as in the Guards, and whom Audrey avoided in speechless terror.

The Mr. Malcolm, who had acted in the play, a briefless barrister, with literary aspirations, was rather more approachable, but Audrey never quite identified the different tweed-clad men and beautifully dressed ladies, who streamed in with rather more punctuality than usual.

"Those bells won't let anybody sleep late today," whispered Dick. "Look, even old Frammy is down. What a swagger tie. Got up to kill, isn't he?"

Presently all the little tables were occupied, and the room filled with the cheerful hum of voices and clatter of plates.

The family party had more or less established themselves at the table in the window, and Audrey sat quietly down in her now familiar place, on Lord Heversham's left hand. He was engaged with his letters, but glanced up with his usual kind smile.

"Tea or coffee, Miss," said the butler behind her, offering steaming cups, and followed by a footman with scones and fresh rolls and other comestibles.

When everybody was served the servants vanished, and Audrey found Gerard behind her, enquiring solicitously if buttered eggs, mushrooms, or fish suited her best.

Audrey turned, and wished him all happy returns of the day, to which he responded by a beautiful bow, and dropping into the seat next her, remarked confidentially, "You are fortunate to have begun early. I have been practising alternate bows and smiles to use during the day. Otherwise I should break my back, or dislocate my jaw. The first person who speaks gets the smile, the second the bow, and so on. You observe you came among the even numbers."

"I observed I didn't get the smile," said Audrey. "The bow alone is rather unnerving, I think."

"Well, perhaps for members of the family, we might try a blend," said Gerard. "A slightly less profound bow, and a rather chilly smile, do you think?"

"I like the smile alone best, I think," said Audrey.

"Then I'm afraid I must trouble you to repeat your remark," said Gerard sadly, "as then you would become an odd number, and entitled to it as your right."

"Gerard," said Marjorie's fresh voice at his elbow, "don't you see that while you are chattering, Audrey's fish has got cold?"

"Poor fish," said Gerard. "Shall we try a little eucalyptus, or put its feet in hot water?"

"Gerard," said Lord Heversham, "I am aware that I have no longer any legal jurisdiction over you, but you would oblige me if you would first eat your breakfast, and then read your letters. The first deputation comes at eleven, remember."

Gerard subsided, and with a resigned sigh attacked his food.

Alison called Audrey to come and look at his presents, which were laid out on a side table, and the girls were soon busy admiring and arranging them.

The usual array of silver and gold cigarette boxes, walking sticks, sporting paraphernalia, sleeve links, and so on, were displayed, and Audrey admired and criticised, until she took up a fine bloodstone, set as a signet ring, engraved with a lion couchant, clasping in his paws an earl's coronet, with the motto, "Wake me not."

She took it in her hand, and gazed so long and steadily at it, that she did not hear the departure of the elders, nor the summons of the girls, till Gerard came up quietly beside her, and said, "You seem to like that ring, Audrey."

Then she blushed scarlet, dropped it into its case, and followed the rest of the party in confusion.

CHAPTER XV

"AN UNWELCOME INVITATION"

"Choose always the way that seems the best, however rough it be."

PYTHAGORAS.

THE rest of that day seemed to Audrey to pass in a riot of noise and colour.

The braying of the bands, the constant outbreaks of apparently delirious joy on the part of the bells, the "feu de joie" fired at midday from the row of little iron cannons that had stood along the front of the house since the days of Cromwell, and were only used on great occasions, the cheers, the crowds, the endless roar of conversation, were rather bewildering. The brilliant dresses of the "county," invited to the big garden party, and the happy bashful faces of the humbler folk, privileged to walk about the lovely gardens and gaze at their will, were pleasant to see. There was a big dinner in the banqueting hall, and an uproarious tenants' supper in the

marquee that had held yesterday's audience, concluding with a most festive ball, in which gentle and simple joined with vigour, and in which Audrey found herself solemnly pacing through a country dance with the very tall footman who had so terrified her on her arrival.

The most undisturbed person appeared to be the hero of the occasion himself. Audrey occasionally caught a glimpse of him, strolling about in a light grey suit, and seeing that no hungry matron was left unfed, or bashful maiden without a suitable cavalier. He looked sad as usual, but as he caught Audrey's eye, there was a wicked twinkle in his, which overset her gravity, so that she laughed aloud and inopportunely, as Mr. Whatshisname, the vicar, was pressing a plate of savoury sandwiches upon her in the tea tent.

He looked up enquiringly, and Audrey was quite overcome with confusion, and greatly relieved when he left her with rather an offended bow.

She saw, however, out of the corner of her eye that he was quickly appeased by Gerard himself, who, taking him by the arm, engaged him in confidential conversation.

"It's all right," he explained in a hasty aside to Audrey, when circumstances threw them together again. "I told him we had invited a few of the harmless patients from Earlswood to come and see the fun. They have little pleasure in their lives, you know."

"Oh," said Audrey, reproachfully. "How could you?"

"Quite easily I did it," said Gerard, modestly. "And what do you think he said?"

"Your noble family, my lord, is conspicuous for its thoughtful kindness. That, I am sure, would have occurred to few of us. I am indeed touched by the considerate and generous idea."

"What a shame," said Audrey, her eyes dancing at the mimicry of the Vicar's polished periods. "If I wasn't sure that you were making it all up, I should be sorry for the poor man."

After dinner, when the orthodox toasts had been drunk and the hackneyed old convivial chorus sung, Gerard made the expected speech.

After a few light sentences referring to the events of the day, he imparted a graver touch by saying seriously that he fully realised that all the honours and kind congratulations were addressed to him, not as an individual, but as a

representative of family history and traditions. That in both capacities he thanked them all most heartily and humbly, and would endeavour with all his power to act up to the example set him by his forbears in the past, and especially by the unselfish and noble characters of his dear parents, to whom he owed all that he had of good. He trusted with God's help that he should never be tempted beyond his strength to lower the standard, or deface the scutcheon of the great family to which he had the honour to belong, and felt that the esteem and affection of his friends and neighbours, however undeserved, would be the strongest inducement and greatest support to him in that aspiration.

He sat down amid a short silence more flattering than applause, and Audrey, sitting among the young ones, felt her eyes fill with tears as she thought what a worthy representative he would make, and what a responsibility rested in her untried hands.

After dinner they all trooped out to the marquee, where Gerard had another speech to make. As he was received with thunderous roars of applause whenever he opened his mouth, and could hardly get a sentence out without being interrupted by shouts of approval, he

confined himself to a few jesting remarks in broad local dialect, which made the simple-minded folk hold their sides with laughter.

"Eh, but I could kiss 'im," was the audible remark of a stout old dame, flapping her hot face with a handkerchief, which was received with so much enthusiasm that Gerard was able to sit down under its cover.

He then led out the good lady in the first dance, and the company gave themselves over to mirth and jollity.

When they had had a few dances, Lady Heversham ruthlessly sent the young ones to bed, saying that they had had a great deal too much excitement as it was, and that she should be much too tired to nurse them if they were all ill tomorrow.

So although Audrey could hear the carriages driving in and out, and the distant strains of music from the ballroom, where the "real grown-up ball" took place, she was really too much worn out with the day to regret her early retirement, and slept soundly till aroused at a later hour than usual by the maid.

She had found a letter lying on her dressing-table overnight, but had been too sleepy to open it, recognising the large sprawling hand of her

cousin Monica, and not anticipating much from its contents.

Now, however, as she sat up and drank her tea out of the rose-painted cup, she opened it.

"DEAREST AUDREY,

I have got a great big piece of news for you. How you will open your eyes. I am really and truly going to be married.

Tom has got an appointment, a medical job, through an old friend of his father's. He has got to go and live in Pekin, and work in the English hospital there. Lucky he is just qualified. And so we are going to be married and go straight out there. His father, who has got lots of cash, provides the necessary. He is really not half a bad old bird, and must have got pots of money put by. I hear the society is quite good, and the climate ripping; the living isn't expensive, and I shall die of laughter at the Chinamen with their pigtails.

You can imagine what a fuss this has put us all in, and how I am to get ready in time I simply don't know. I'm trying on all day. Luckily I got a lot of things at Evans' great white sale last month, and Tom says the Chinese are splendid at copying, and if I take

out a few good frocks they can make more out there.

Now, dear Audrey, you must absolutely come and be my bridesmaid. I read all about your grand doings in the "Lady," and there were some spicy little bits in "Modern Society" too. What bosh are they talking about your having saved somebody's life? You can tell me all about the dresses when you come, and do pick up all the hints you can. I suppose we must hire a couple of waiters, and have champagne. Father says there needn't be, as it must be a morning wedding, worse luck. But I tell him it would look so mean not to, and we can return unopened bottles.

That new frock of yours you told me about would do for a pattern, and I want you to be a dear and send it me in a box, to have it copied for Laura.

I'm only going to have you two. It looks more 'chick,' and Tom doesn't want to give a lot of presents.

The wedding day is to be today fortnight. Lor'! I can hardly believe it. You simply must come, and as soon as you can. There's crowds to do. I'm getting presents already. Such a jolly silver-gilt cake-basket from the Tomlinsons.

I didn't expect them to cut it so fat. My word, what a screed I've sent you.

Your loving cousin,

MONICA BAXTER."

Audrey lay back, and considered while she sipped her tea.

The plan had been that she was to go with the Dorincourts to Scotland, and she had been looking forward to it very much.

But she felt she had been rather neglecting her own people of late, and this was an occasion at which she must appear, or give eternal offence.

Her heart sank as she contemplated the prospect. How could she bear to go back to that life again?

She contrasted the narrow conventions of Brixton with the free atmosphere of Dorincourt. She thought of the little vulgar ambitions, the desire to outshine your neighbours and snub your social inferiors, compared with the instinctive habit of putting other people at their ease and seeing the best in everybody, that was in the very air of Dorincourt.

But this seemed a case of clear duty, and Andrey knew what she must do, distasteful though it might be.

So after breakfast she sought Lady Heversham in her sanctum, where she did the household business of her large establishment.

Audrey knew her hours, and crept quietly in, waiting till Lady Heversham had dismissed the dignified Mrs. Carpenter, with a pleasant smile and word of thanks.

Then she turned to Audrey. "What is it, sweetheart?" she said. "Can I do anything for you?"

"Dear Lady Heversham," said Audrey, "it's only that I am afraid that I mustn't come to Scotland with you."

"Mustn't you, dear?" said Lady Heversham, placidly. Audrey's evident regret and suppressed agitation did not seem to strike her, and Audrey realised that what seemed such a great thing to her, might not shake the foundations of the world to others.

"No," she said. "I've heard from my cousin, and she is going to be married in a fortnight, and she wants me to come back and be her bridesmaid."

"Very pleasant for you," murmured Lady Heversham. "But we shall be sorry not to have you with us in the North. Couldn't you join us afterwards?"

Audrey shook her head regretfully. "I'm afraid not. You see the holidays end on the 21st September, and it would hardly be worth while."

"You mustn't let any question of expense stop you, dear child," said Lady Heversham, kindly. "You know we all consider you as one of the family now, and my husband wanted you to come as his guest altogether."

"One of the family." Audrey bit her lips, as she thought of the truth of the words, but though her eyes filled, she still shook her head, saying bravely,

"It isn't that. But I think I ought to go home for a time. My uncle will be lonely, and, after all, now Alison is coming to Miss Fenwick's, I shall see her again quite soon."

Lady Heversham saw the effort and respected it. She put her hand caressingly on Audrey's shoulders, and said, "I am sure you are doing quite right. And one never regrets that. We shall be sorry not to have you at Glentulloch, but we will hope next year to have a longer time to spend there, and you must come with us."

So Audrey made her sacrifice, and went away with a light conscience, though rather a heavy heart.

CHAPTER XVI

BRIXTON AGAIN

"Misses, the tale that I relate, this lesson seems to carry,
Choose not alone a proper mate, but proper time to marry."

COWPER.

MYRTLE ROAD, Brixton, looked rather less dreary as Audrey drove up to it this time.

The August sunshine, mote-filled, as London sunshine always is, shone dustily on the door-step, which was unexpectedly clean, and the grained oak door, which had been newly varnished.

Several pots of red geraniums and yellow calceolarias adorned the sill of the dining-room window, hiding the black wire blind, which protected the privacy of the inmates.

The door was opened by a new maid in a remarkably clean cap and apron, and no red bow, and behind her in the hall were the two cousins, evidently just returned from a walk.

They were dressed alike in black and white

muslins, with very narrow skirts, and wore enormous drooping black mushroom hats, much wider behind than before, with their hair elaborately puffed and frizzled. They had evidently been paying a visit of some social importance, and were so glad to have a new auditor, that their welcome of Audrey was quite genuine.

"What a bit of luck we got back in time to meet you," said Laura, and Monica kissed her cousin with real kindness.

Audrey felt ashamed of the gloomy forebodings she had indulged in, and felt cheered up.

The dingy hall, with its yellow marble paper, and vari-coloured floorcloth, though no less hideous than before, did not seem to matter so much, and she looked at the coloured glass fanlight over the door with a measure of toleration.

"What a lot of difference it makes when people are nice to one," she thought.

"Come in without taking your things off," said Monica, hospitably. "I told Janet to bring tea directly we were back, and I thought we might all go on a bus afterwards to Hyde Park corner, and sit in the Park a bit."

"That's because of the new hat," said Laura

slyly, "and, of course, there'll be nobody to see it. Oh dear no."

"Have a jam sandwich, Audrey," said Monica. "And now I must tell you where we've been to. Did you ever hear of Sir Richard Widewent?"

"Yes," said Audrey, "the great doctor."

"Well," said Monica, importantly, "he is an old friend of Tom's father, and Lady Widewent wrote me such a sweet letter, asking us to call today, and let them make the acquaintance of Tom's bride."

"It wasn't such a very sweet letter," said Laura, morosely, "and she never asked us to tea."

"Well, if she had, I shouldn't have stayed," said Monica, loftily. "I should have said we had a cousin coming. It doesn't do to make oneself too cheap."

"Such a jolly big house in Harley Street," said Laura, more cheerfully, "and a butler and a footman to open the door."

"Tom couldn't come," interpolated Monica. "Sir Richard said he was glad, as he wanted to make my acquaintance. He was a perfect treasure. Such manners, and such piercing eyes."

"Tom will be getting jealous," said Laura.

"You did have quite a flirtation with the old boy, didn't you?"

"He told me about China," said Monica. "He's lived there, and he told me everything wouldn't always be rose coloured, but a little courage and tact would pull one through. A young doctor depends a good deal upon his wife, he said. Oh, and a lot more. Have another cup, Audrey."

Audrey looked at her, and decided that Monica had improved. She was more steady in her manner, and talked less. Wonderful result of being engaged to Tommy Robson. But Love works with strange tools often.

The windows were open and the blinds half down, to keep out the sun. The room, however, felt stuffy and airless, though Audrey thought it looked cleaner. It reminded her so much of the kind gentle aunt, that she wondered that the girls were able to talk and laugh so unconcernedly.

The faded armchair where she used to sit was drawn back against the wall, but the little ramshackle table still held her work-basket and the shabby scent bottle. The piano had been put at a new angle, and hung with a yellow silk curtain, and there was a terrible erection of Pampas grass, dyed in three colours, in the

fireplace. But otherwise the room was unchanged, and Audrey felt a little pang for the familiar presence gone. But the girls chattered on.

"One of the first things you've got to do, Audrey," said Laura, "is to help us to make the new cretonnes. We got all the stuff at Harrod's sale, at a great reduction, because it hadn't sold, and we've got to make it up this week. It makes all the difference to the room. I wanted to have it re-papered too, but father turned rusty over that. And after all it isn't really dirty. A few fans here and there will cover the faded places."

"What sort of cretonne have you got?" asked Audrey.

"Oh, a nice cheerful one. I do like a bit of colour, and the man said it would wash like a rag. Here it is," and she displayed a brilliant design of purple and yellow tulips, gracefully entwined with crimson seaweed on a blue ground.

Audrey agreed that it was certainly very bright and cheerful, and the cousins launched out into descriptions of the trousseau, presents, the guests to be invited, and the arrangements.

"Father won't have an awning," grumbled Laura. "He said if it was in the winter it would be all very well, but that it was an absurd

and useless expense at this time of year. We had quite a row over it, but he can be jolly obstinate if he likes."

"It certainly looks as if it would never rain again," said Audrey, with a glance into the sun-baked street. "But a strip of red carpet looks very nice."

"I suppose you've been seeing lots of it," said Monica, with a sudden recollection of her cousin's affairs. "How gay you are, dashing about from one thing to another. First a coming of age, and then a wedding."

"Tell us some more while we are on the bus," said Laura, and the three started.

Audrey soon found that her cousins had not such an overwhelming desire for information, as for properly impressing the other passengers, and she found herself closely questioned about the Earl and the Countess, Lord Windlesham and Lady Marjorie, in the loud unrestrained voices that had always annoyed her. She shrank into herself, and gave monosyllabic answers in a low tone, till Laura said crossly, "Oh let her alone, Monica. She's in one of her high and mighty moods. Look at that hat. Isn't it sweet?"

Audrey glanced down instinctively. Two ladies, sitting in a victoria, delayed by the crush

round the Park gates, glanced up at the same moment. The one in the pretty hat caught Audrey's eye, and a charming nod and smile, and light kiss of delicately gloved fingers, showed the cousins that this was one of Audrey's "swells."

"Why, she knows you, Audrey. Whoever is it?"

"That was Lady Marjorie," said Audrey, feeling for the moment hot with confusion. "I knew she was in town for a few days."

"Who was the old Judy with her?" demanded Laura. "She didn't look up to much, anyhow."

"That was the Duchess of Brighthelmstone," said Audrey in a small voice. "Hadn't we better get down here and walk? We shan't get taken any further in this block."

"That old thing a Duchess," said Laura. "She looked like an old char. But I must say, Audrey, your pal's pretty. I should like a hat like that. Where does she buy hers?"

"I think she goes to some place in Hanover Square, or to Paris for her best hats," said Audrey rather unwillingly. "But she trims her own for the country."

"Does she?" enquired Laura. "Well, I declare I shouldn't bother if I was her. Here's

a seat. Let's sit down and look at the people. Audrey can tell us who they all are."

"I can't," said Audrey. "I only saw the people in the house. Besides, everybody's out of town."

"There's lots left, anyhow," observed Monica. "I like that fashion of coloured stockings, and a bit to match in your hat. I'll get some like that. What time is it, Laura?"

"Nearly six, if that clock's right," answered Laura. "Time for Tommy to turn up."

Audrey sat dreamily hearing, without joining in their talk. The sight of Marjorie, cool, graceful, and unaffected, had roused a sort of wave of homesickness in her heart. The contrast between her and the Baxter girls was too marked. Why should Audrey condemn herself for ever to this little vulgar minded world, when she belonged by right to that wider and more beautiful one?

The problem rose and confronted her again. What had seemed rather fine and noble at Dorincourt seemed suddenly to shrink to something ineffably foolish and absurd.

Why should she not claim her rights? Why should she sacrifice herself? It could surely be managed that the family should not become impoverished. They didn't care for the rank

The ancestry and traditions would still be theirs. She could entertain them at Dorincourt, as they had her, and never let them feel the difference.

An exclamation from Monica broke the thread of her thoughts. "Why, here's Tom, and another fellow with him. Why, it's your mash, Laura, Claude Heskett."

"Don't call him my mash," simpered Laura, as stout, good-natured Tommy Robson came beaming up, guiding a somewhat elaborate-looking youth, with fair curly hair and a young moustache.

"Evenin', Laura. Evenin', Miss Denver," said Tommy. "Or I think I ought to be allowed a cousinly privilege now, don't you, Monny?"

Audrey draw back, and looked so startled that they all broke into a laugh.

"You needn't be afraid. He don't want to kiss you, Audrey," said Laura, loudly. "He only wants to drop the Miss Denver."

"For the present," said Tommy, with a killing air, "that is all I require. Any objection, Miss?"

Poor Audrey had every objection, but hardly knew how to word it. In the midst of her perplexity, a carriage stopped at the railings in front of them, and an imperious gesture from the shabby little old lady in it summoned her.

She rose thankfully and left the group.

"Come for a turn with me, Miss Denver," the little old Duchess said. "I've dropped Marjorie in Park Lane, and I'm not going in for half an hour. I'll drive you home if you like."

"Oh no, thank you," said Audrey, gratefully. "I live in Brixton, quite too far to drive. But I would like one turn very much."

"Who were the folks you were with?" demanded the old lady with uncompromising directness. "Not your style, my dear, at all. I was sorry to see you with them."

"They were my cousins," said Audrey bravely, though with burning cheeks. "One of them is engaged to marry that stout young man. The other is a friend of his."

"Good child," said the Duchess. "I like honesty. Nobody's ever the worse for telling the truth. It's better round here, isn't it? The water cools the air a bit. I am up to see my dentist. My old teeth are bothering me, or I shouldn't be in town now. I've got quite a clever little man, called Heskett, but it's a bore coming up. You must come and see me, child. We're living in one room, and keeping the covers on, but I can give you a cup of tea. Remember,

180 Park Lane. I've got another week in town for my sins."

"Here we are again. I see your friends. I won't stop. Let Miss Denver out, Charles. Au revoir," and Audrey was returned to the hands of her admiring relatives.

CHAPTER XVII

MONICA'S WEDDING

"So with decorum all things carried,
Miss frowned and blushed and then was — married."
GOLDSMITH.

THE wedding day dawned fine, but a hot little wind raised the dust in spiral curls, and Laura, looking out, prognosticated rain before night.

The bride did not look her best at the moment of waking, for her hair had been twined and waved into every possible variety of Hinde's curlers. She had slept in a face mask, a nose improver, and a chin strap, and rather looked as if she had not had a good night.

She removed these adornments gingerly, and anxiously inspected her face in the glass, to observe the result.

"I believe half these advertisements are frauds," she grumbled, as she rubbed her ill-used countenance with face cream. "I don't see any difference, and I hardly slept a wink."

"Never mind," said Audrey, consolingly. "It's rather interesting to be pale, and Mr. Robson won't notice."

"Not he," said Laura, waspishly. "He'll be too much taken up with his tie, and the set of his trousers, to look at you."

Monica, cautiously dabbing the end of her nose with powder, vouchsafed no reply.

"I'll have my breakfast sent up," she said. "I'll keep on that chin strap a bit. I believe it really has fined me down a little. What a nuisance it is to have a double chin."

"Janet won't want to be running up and down with your breakfast," observed Laura. "She's half dotty with excitement as it is."

"I'll bring it up," said Audrey, "and then you will be able to dress quietly. It'll take you a long time to do your hair, and that dress takes a lot of getting into, with all those buttons."

"Miss Fanchette said it was just like Lady Madeline St. Leger's," said Monica. "But I thought it would be a plague to put on. Only, as I shall have to cut it down directly for dining out, there won't be quite so many buttons to do up."

"I do like your traveling dress," said Audrey. "That pale grey touched with black is very

pretty, and the black hat. I am so glad you chose that instead of the shrimp pink."

"Well, I think it is a bit too Quakerish myself," said Monica. "But it'll come in useful for quiet teas, and so on."

"Fancy going out to quiet teas in Tientsin," said Laura. "You ought to get good tea, at any rate. Come along, Audrey; I'm sure breakfast is ready, I smell bloaters."

Audrey took up her cousin's tray, and regarded her curiously as she fussed about among her clothes. It seemed an odd state of mind to be in on the most important occasion of your life, but Audrey thought she detected traces of tears, and felt that half of the fidget was assumed to hide something deeper.

So she gave Monica a friendly little pat, as she passed her, after putting the tray down on the bed, every chair and table being encumbered with finery.

This seemed to be the last straw, and Monica gave a convulsive choke, saying desperately, "Don't, Audrey, for goodness' sake don't upset me. What shall I do if my eyes are all red? I shall look a sight. But oh, Audrey, it is at these times that a gurl wants her mum-mum-mother."

And the sobs broke out unrestrainedly, while Audrey could only stroke the plump hands and administer a gentle kiss of sympathy.

"There, I'm better now," said Monica. "I expect it was best to get it over. But, good gracious, what a figure I've made of myself. Audrey, run and get Laura's eau-de-cologne. Now pass me the powder. What a fool I am."

"I shouldn't bother," said Audrey. "Just sponge your eyes with cold water, and sit by the open window for a bit. You've lots of time yet. It won't show, and it wouldn't matter if it does. Here's your bouquet," as the maid knocked and handed in a cardboard box. "Isn't that perfectly lovely?"

Monica soon recovered herself, sniffing and exclaiming at the florist's triumph, and when Laura came up, bursting with excitement over the bridesmaids' posies, she noticed nothing.

When the bride came down, in all the glory of white satin and orange blossoms, she looked very well, much better than she had ever done, Audrey thought, and she liked the way her father, a degree less dishevelled and untidy than usual, kissed her, and regarded her paternally.

But any serious thoughts were soon dispelled

by the cheerful entrance of Alf, in a mustard-coloured waistcoat and white spats.

"Hullo! everybody. How's the blusher?" was his greeting. "I've been having a look at the trooso," and he polkaed round the room, his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat, singing in a falsetto voice,

> "Mary had a Directoire frock,
> The sort that's cut in half.
> Who cares a button for Mary's mutton,
> Now they can ——"

"Don't, Alf," said Monica, who was acquainted with this lyric, perhaps rather peevishly for a bride. "Do shut up; it isn't funny, you know."

So Alf put on an air of sham penitence and sidled to a chair, his finger in his mouth.

Laura laughed, but Monica looked away, and Audrey was very busy buttoning up her gloves.

It was the second time she had worn her lace frock, and it seemed almost intolerably full of associations.

Laura's short dumpy figure was arrayed in as close an imitation of it as the dressmaker could produce, but she was not satisfied with the result, and kept prinking before the mirror, pulling here and patting there.

"I can't think why your skirt hangs so much better than mine, Audrey," she said discontentedly. "I shall have to get it altered. Oh, here's father. Goodness, look at his tie." Mr. Baxter wearily advanced his chin, with its fringe of ragged beard, to have his tie adjusted, then drawing on a pair of new gloves, said fretfully, "Surely the carriage ought to be here. I ordered it at twenty to eleven."

"It's only half-past ten yet," said Alf. "And it doesn't do for the lady to be earlier than the gent, you know. Looks as if she was a bit too keen, eh, old girl?" and he playfully chucked Monica under the chin.

Just then the door opened and a stream of friends and Baxter relations poured in. They had been inspecting the presents, which had been laid out in Mr. Baxter's study, to his intense misery and discomfiture.

"Why, if here isn't the bride. All ready. Why, Monica, how nice you look, and what lovely flowers."

"That frock looks all right, but I should think it's a bit tight for comfort" (aside).

"I do like the dear old-fashioned orange blossom," simpered a sentimental spinster. "So full of associations."

"What's your associations, Tilda?" enquired Mr. Alf, with his head on one side.

"Don't be rude, Alfred," said her mother, a forbidding looking personage in a purple velvet bonnet. "Rudeness isn't wit."

"Only natural curiosity, Aunt Jane," responded Alf, unabashed. "Come and have a wet, Uncle James. Rudeness isn't *wet*."

"Oh, Alf," groaned the cousins in chorus, the accepted applause for that particular form of humour.

"A doleful lot, aren't they?" confided Alf to his companion. "I try to liven them up a bit, but it doesn't seem to go down somehow."

"Audrey Denver's growing a good-looking young woman," said the other.

"A bit shy and stand-off," said Alf. "But she's young yet. She'll warm up. Trust a pretty girl to find it out. But she's got a bit above herself, with all her swell friends."

The carriages came round from the livery stables, each coachman resplendent with a white satin favour and a white bow on his whip, and drove off in procession to the church.

As Audrey passed up the aisle behind Monica's shining tail, the pews filled with smartly dressed people, all whispering and giggling, the stir and

rustle of their silks and satins, and their over-trimmed enormous hats, inspired her with a sense of disgust.

Was there not one among them, she thought, who had the least idea of what a serious business they were assisting at. How could they giggle and laugh while such solemn words were being uttered.

Not like that, Audrey felt, would the Dorincourts regard the marriage of one of their daughters.

But she pulled herself up short. Not even in thought would she allow herself to compare them. That way temptation lay.

As the bridesmaids followed the happy couple into the vestry, she even forced herself to accept the "cousinly salute" that Mr. Thomas Robson insisted on bestowing on both, and only when Mr. Heskett showed signs of following his example, did she draw the line.

He was best man, and with Laura kept up a constant flow of airy and not too refined chaff, and when at last the wedded pair escaped into their carriage, Audrey heaved a sigh of relief.

She and Laura drove home with Mr. Baxter, who was very silent and depressed.

Laura tried to rally him, but Audrey, divining

what he was feeling, checked her cousin's wit, and when he vanished into his own room upstairs immediately on arrival, she discouraged all attempts to disturb him.

"Just as well, perhaps," said Alf. "The pater going about like a sick monkey wasn't a very enlivening object. We shall do better without him."

So the bottles of cheap champagne were broached, the gorgeous wedding cake cut, the sandwiches and sweets handed round, and the conversation became more and more unrestrained.

Alf insisted upon making a speech, though he said he found it a bit awkward without a table to get under, in which he made bantering remarks to the young ladies present, recommending them to look alive if they wanted handsome husbands. The supply was getting scarce. He, for one, couldn't answer for its going round. Not that he was particular. Oh, no, the best of everything was good enough for him, and any good-looking lady of comfortable income, who fancied him, was welcome to step up. Age didn't matter. He liked them a bit mellow.

And so on, amid much applause and merriment.

Then the happy couple sneaked downstairs, but were betrayed by treacherous friends, and

fled for their lives, blinded by showers of rice, confetti, and little silver cardboard horse-shoes.

"Such an elegant idea of Mr. Heskett's," said Laura, "and quite cheap too."

The old shoe was tied on behind, and Alf led the uproarious chorus of cheers as the hired brougham disappeared.

"They won't forget their wedding day in a hurry," he remarked confidentially to Audrey, who happened to be nearest. "I got their boxes opened, and filled every blessed thing, shoes, gloves, powder boxes, 'oh-no-we-never-mention-ems,' and all, with rice. The umbrellas are full, and all his pockets. It'll take 'em weeks to get rid of it. Good idea, what."

But Audrey had fled.

Upstairs, in her own room, she was tearing off her finery and flinging it into a drawer. "I cannot bear it. I cannot. I'm sure it's no good trying. I'll write to—who—Gerard? No! Marjorie. Oh, no! Lord or Lady Heversham? The idea was insupportable. I must wait till I see them again," she thought. "But I will tell. I will!"

Thinking that she might be wanted, she put on a summer cambric, brushed her hair, and came downstairs.

The débris of the scattered rice and confetti, the disarranged furniture, the horrible remains of the wedding feast, looked incongruous in the daylight, and she came upon her uncle wandering disconsolately about the dismantled rooms. She slipped her hand into his, and coaxed him to take her out of the disordered house into the fresh air.

CHAPTER XVIII

OLD FRIENDS

"We meet thee like a pleasant thought,
When such are wanted."

WORDSWORTH.

AFTER the wedding, Mr. Baxter, with Laura and Audrey, moved into lodgings at St. Leonards for a change.

It was better than Brixton, Audrey thought, or Herne Bay, but it was a crowded time, and she got much bored with the numbers of people there.

They had taken rooms in a side street, as those on the front were too dear, and the outlook from their windows was not exhilarating, consisting of a row of shabby shops.

They had taken one sitting-room and two bedrooms, and were themselves situated over a greengrocer's.

Mr. Alf declared himself too busy in town to accompany them, but promised them the pleasure of his society for Sundays.

Audrey shared a room with Laura, so had little solitude or opportunity for thinking over the perplexing problem that was ever in her thoughts.

But she sometimes got down on to the shore, and sitting under a breakwater, with a book which she rarely opened, would think and think till she could think no more.

The immensity of space, the open distance, the soothing roar and rush of the waves, helped to compose her mind, and she could sometimes rise to the height of self-sacrifice that she had before achieved, and feel the purest sense of happiness in it. Then Laura would come along, her flat feet encased in white sand-shoes, her coalheaver hat halfway down her back, calling in her strident tones, "Audrey, come along in. Mr. Heskett's just turned up, and I've got some prawns for tea. He wants to take us to the Pier, to the entertainment, and there isn't too much time."

And Audrey would feel the old sick distaste return, and would wearily follow her cousin back to the stuffy lodgings, to be mildly chaffed by Mr. Heskett on her preference for solitary walks.

"I really cawn't see, Miss Denver, why you don't come on the Esplanade. Looking at the sea fairly gives me the hump, and when you can hear a

decent band, and see a lot of pretty gurls about, there you'll find me."

"Possibly Audrey may not find it so amusing to look at pretty girls as you do," said Mr. Baxter, mildly sarcastic.

"Oh, well, there's more than gurls there," said Mr. Heskett, with a wink. "But I daresay Miss Audrey is a bit too used to seeing one in her glass to care about it."

Audrey reddened with annoyance, but Laura said, rather sharply, "You needn't blush, you know, Audrey. He doesn't mean anything but chaff," which made her all the hotter.

Alf came down according to contract for the week-end, resplendent in new flannels, a straw hat with the Guards' ribbon on it, and yellow boots.

Audrey for once was thankful to see him. Her rôle of chaperone was intolerably irksome, and she gladly handed over the responsibility to him.

On Saturday, after the midday dinner, she escaped, on the excuse of posting a letter, and when out of sight of the windows, fled like a hunted hare in the direction of Bexhill, where the Esplanade ended, and the beach was comparatively deserted.

She walked as rapidly as she could along the shelving pebbles, until she found a breakwater where the shingle had sunk away on one side, sufficiently to afford her a shelter, and she crouched down behind it, opened her white cotton umbrella, and drew a deep sigh of relief.

She read a few pages, but gradually let the book fall on her knee, while the question rose up again in her mind.

She was deep in thought, absently building up a little cairn of pebbles before her, when she heard a voice she knew.

Looking up, she saw, with a start of pleasure, Lilian Adair passing, with a pink faced smiling girl whom she recognised as Mollie Willoughby, one of the Adairs' house party.

She jumped up, and they greeted her warmly.

"How very funny to meet you here," exclaimed Lilian. "Where are you staying?"

"In St. Leonards," she replied, "with my uncle. Are you there too?"

"Oh no, we're in Bexhill," said Lilian. "Father's taken a little house there, rather jolly, with a tennis court, and we're here for the holidays. I like the bathing, but it's a bit overcrowded, isn't it?"

"Better to be in your own house than rooms,"

said Audrey. "One feels dreadfully stuffed up sometimes, when it's so hot, and I do long for a bit of shade."

"We've got a little garden, but rather a new one," said Lilian. "I was bringing Mollie to have a look at the people. She is accustomed to a wild bit of shore on the west coast of Cumberland, where you see nobody but yourselves and a few seagulls. But she's had enough of it, and we are just going to catch a tram home to tea. Won't you come too?"

"Why, yes, I'd love it," said Audrey, gratefully. "My people are all out for the afternoon, and I was going to be quite alone."

As they buzzed along in the tram, Mollie said to Audrey, "Did you stay much longer with those delightful Dorincourts?"

"About a week after I saw you," said Audrey. "They've all gone to Scotland now."

"I thought you were going with them," said Mollie. "I heard Dick talking about it, and I wanted to ask you to come to stay with us on the way there or back."

"How awfully good of you," said Audrey. "I wish I could have come, but my cousin was going to be married, and I came home to be her bridesmaid."

"I don't think it's much catch being a bridesmaid, if you ask me," said Lilian. "I've been one four times, and I won't be ever again. I only accepted the last so that Bob couldn't say, "Three times a bridesmaid, never a bride."

"There's nothing in that," said Mollie wisely. "I know two people who were, and they got married all right."

"What did you wear, Audrey?" enquired Lilian.

"I wore that white lace frock that you saw me in at Dorincourt," said Audrey, candidly, though she saw a flicker of surprise on both the girls' faces. "And my cousin had one made like it. We're not rich people, you know."

"It was a sweet frock," said Mollie warmly. "It must have looked awfully nice. Did you have a bouquet, and what did the bridegroom give you?"

"He gave us enamel lockets," said Audrey. "And we had bouquets of pink roses."

"I saw a swagger wedding the other day," said Lilian. "They all wore Empire frocks, and carried tall walking-sticks with bunches of Dorothy Perkins on the handles. The bride's name was Dorothy Perkins before she changed it. Wasn't it killing?"

Both the girls laughed, and Mollie said, "I should think she was glad to change it. How she must have been chaffed."

"She always called herself Doris," said Lilian. "But when the clergyman read out her real name in the banns, we were all so amused. It made quite a little laugh in the church. But now she's Dorothy Lansdell, so that's all right."

"I saw a wedding in the paper the other day that amused me," said Mollie. "The bride's name was Grubb, and she married a man called Beetles."

"Not much of a change for the better," said Lilian. "But here we are."

Audrey was perfectly happy again to find herself among her friends. If they were not the rose, at any rate they had been near the rose.

Comfortable Mrs. Adair rose to meet her with some difficulty out of a canvas deck chair, saying with a good-natured laugh,

"You really must give me a higher chair, children, when you bring unexpected visitors. I am getting too stout for these flimsy affairs."

Tea was laid under a little copper beech tree, which, though of tender years, managed to cast

a little shade over a corner of the lawn. There was a good tennis ground, and a little shrubbery to screen the garden from the road, but not much else.

The house was of the villa type, but clean and fresh looking, with white balconies and pots of geraniums, and a little gravel terrace in front.

Captain Adair and Harold were both there, and their father speedily appeared.

He was really pleased to see Audrey again, and invited her to share his sheltered garden seat. It was very hot, but the cool green of the little lawn and young trees, through which could be seen the sparkling blue sea, were grateful and comforting to Audrey's eyes, tired with the glare of the Esplanade and the beach. She drank her tea in silent enjoyment, listening to the quiet pleasant voices round her, in their friendly family chatter.

Presently Colonel Adair said, "Have you been saving anybody else's life lately, Miss Denver?"

Then as Audrey, laughing and colouring, shook her head, he continued, "I think you had better join our bathing parties here. We have two tents, and I should feel much safer about my family if I had a sort of Grace Darling like you to be with them."

"Grace Darling didn't swim, father," exclaimed Harold. "She only rowed a boat."

"Ah, well, I expect she knew pretty well how to swim before she started."

"Father," said Sybil reproachfully, "you're taking away half her credit."

"I beg the lady's pardon," he said meekly. "But to return to the point. Miss Denver, couldn't you come over and spend the day, and do some sea-fishing as well? Are you as good a sailor as you are swimmer?"

"I don't know," said Audrey. "I never was on the sea in my life."

"Then that settles it," said Colonel Adair. "Consider yourself engaged for Monday."

"But, my dear," interposed Mrs. Adair, "Miss Denver is staying with friends. Possibly she has other engagements."

"Bring her friends along then, too," said the hospitable Colonel.

Audrey pictured to herself the effect of Laura and Alf's appearance, and an uncontrollable smile curled her lips, as she said she would be very pleased to come, but that her cousin Laura had a great many engagements, and that her other cousin, who was going to be a doctor, was going back to work on Monday.

"Haven't you an uncle, too?" asked Lilian.

"Oh, yes," said Audrey, but she didn't think he would care for sea-fishing. He liked to sit in one of the glass shelters and listen to the music, best. He had been working rather hard in London and wanted to rest.

"A good blow on the sea would be just the thing for him," declared Bob. "I'll come back with you, Miss Denver, if I may, and ask him."

Audrey was ashamed of the sudden impulse she felt to refuse this offer. She really was a horrid snob, she thought. She ought not to be ashamed of her relations, her own mother's people. She must try and get over this petty feeling. If her friends liked her for herself, her relations wouldn't matter.

So she said soberly that she would be glad to introduce Captain Adair to her uncle, and went on with her tea.

Mrs. Adair, watching her, thought, "What an expressive sensitive face that child has. I wonder why she didn't like the idea, and then accepted it. I wonder who her people are. Anyhow, it won't hurt Bob to see them, and the child herself is charming."

CHAPTER XIX

SEA-FISHING

"I am, sir, a brother of the angle."

IZAAK WALTON.

AUDREY felt a little shy when, the lengthening shadows warning her of the lateness of the hour, she rose to say goodbye, and Captain Adair, snatching a cap from the unsuspecting Harold, declared his intention of escorting her home.

"I say, you are a cad," remonstrated Harold. "That's my new cap."

"So I observed," said Bob, calmly. "You can go and get mine if you're anxious about your complexion. I hear the tram bell ringing. Come along, Miss Denver."

And he hurried her off with such rapidity that she had hardly time for her farewells.

Arrived at St. Leonards, Audrey led Bob up the shabby street, and in at the little private door by the greengrocer's shop, up the narrow

stairs, into the sitting-room. It looked even more tawdry and pretentious than usual, and though, to her relief, Alf was not present, Laura was.

She was poring over the pages of an aggressively pink paper, which she hastily put out of sight, but which Bob's accustomed eyes recognised without difficulty.

Audrey shyly introduced Bob, and the manners and attitude of Laura underwent a metamorphosis, which was laughable in its completeness.

"Oh, indeed, very pleased I'm sure," she simpered, patting her puffs of hair into place, while she pushed the "Pink Un" under the chair with her foot. Audrey explained that she had met Miss Adair on the shore, and had gone back to tea with them, and that Captain Adair had kindly seen her home.

Laura's sharp little eyes were wandering over his face and figure all the time Audrey was speaking, and she addressed him with the bridle and pout she had found efficacious with the youths of Brixton.

"Really, Captain Adair, I have a bone to pick with you. We waited for Audrey for ages this afternoon. We had got up a little party to go to the entertainment on the Pier, 'The Comics,'

so clever and amusin', and she went out to post a letter and never came back. Alf was angry about it, I can tell you."

"You didn't say you wanted me," said Audrey, feeling guilty, and Bob Adair said politely that he had heard the Comics, and that they were very popular, he believed.

"Where is Uncle John?" said Audrey.

"He has gone to the reading-room, and Mr. Heskett and Alf went to get some cigarettes and haven't come in. I expect they went back to the pier," said Laura. "How do you like St. Leonards, Captain Adair?"

"Rather a hole," said Bob. "But it suits the children, and my mother believes in the air here. I'm not staying here much longer. I am going to Scotland to shoot."

Audrey saw the light leap into his eyes, and knew without telling where he was going to stay.

"Oh, how delightful," said Laura. "Scotland is the land of romance. I have dreamt of going there often, but my father holds a Government appointment, you know, and has very short holidays. And now my sister's married I shall be much tied at home."

She glanced up under her rather short eye-

lashes in a fascinating way, but Bob was gazing fixedly at an oleograph on the wall, and the glance was lost upon him.

Just then Mr. Baxter's heavy, tired step was heard, and he came clumsily into the room, peering round with his short-sighted eyes.

Audrey mentioned Captain Adair's name, and he spoke civilly to him. He was too melancholy and absent to be pretentious, and Bob Adair and he fell into conversation without difficulty. Audrey heard the invitation to the sea-fishing party given, and to her surprise accepted. It appeared that Mr. Baxter was fond of the sea, and used to fish when he was a young man and lived near the coast.

Audrey realised with a feeling of self-reproach how very little interest she had taken in her uncle's pursuits, and how ignorant she was of them. Laura said in an affected tone of regret, "Most charmin' of you, Captain Adair, but I'm sorry I'm engaged tomorrow. I'm going with a gentleman friend to a concert."

Audrey knew this was only a phase of the policy of not making oneself too cheap, but felt too devoutly thankful to utter any protest, and was relieved when Bob got up and took his departure.

He was a silent young man, and not given to criticising his neighbours, and did not say much about Audrey's relatives at home, merely observing that she and the uncle were coming, and that the uncle was a seedy-looking old buffer.

"What's the cousin like?" asked Sybil.

"Oh, I don't know," said Bob, vaguely. "Stoutish party, I think. I didn't talk to her much."

The fishing party assembled duly, and set forth on their expedition. Mr. Baxter, with a recollection of his youth, brought a pair of old waders, borrowed from his landlord, a fisherman, which presented a somewhat incongruous appearance with a pair of check trousers and a shabby black coat. But his depressed countenance was brighter than it had been since his wife's death, and he showed unexpected skill in handling the lines, while the fish seemed to prefer his hooks to any others.

As Audrey watched him, his pale face a little less pale than usual, his eyes bright with interest, his sparse hair ruffled, and his slack, indifferent manner changed into alertness and confidence, she thought with new-born sympathy that he might have been rather good-looking as a young man.

He was not awkward or shy with the Adairs, whose pleasant ways put him at his ease. Colonel Adair had come, though Bob had not, and Harold and Sybil, with Mollie Willoughby and Audrey, made a good boat load.

Audrey did not care about the fishing, but loved the motion of the boat and the wild free breeze. She took off her hat, and let it blow her hair about, plunged her hands into the water, and simply revelled in the new experience.

Sybil fished steadily and conscientiously in silence, but Mollie found time to chatter. She told Audrey all about her own home in Devonshire, in a country rectory, with three little sisters. But how they spent all their holidays in Cumberland, in a great house standing on the borders of the beautiful Lake country. How she and her cousin, Dorothy Wyndham, had gone up all alone to stay with their fierce old grandfather, General Stuart, after the death of his only son. How terrified they had been of him. But how in the end a little brother had come to Dorothy Wyndham, and then somehow some old family feud had been healed, and their two mothers had been invited to make the Towers their home.

"Quite like a story book," said Audrey.

"You must come up sometime," said Mollie, hospitably. "Alison and Dick Dorincourt are engaged for a week in the Christmas holidays, and we'll have some high old times."

"Oh, I do hope I can come," said Audrey wistfully.

"I'll ask Mr. Baxter," said Mollie, and attacked him without further ado. "Mr. Baxter, will you let Audrey come and stay with us next holidays?"

"Certainly, Miss Adair," he replied vaguely, his thoughts busy below the clear surface of the water.

"I'm not Miss Adair," she said, "I'm Mollie Willoughby. But you've given consent, haven't you? The name doesn't matter. Then that's settled, Audrey. I may call you Audrey, mayn't I? You had better join on to the Dorincourts, and travel with them. It's a pretty long journey."

"You're going ahead rather fast," Audrey said laughing. "Why not settle our trains at once, and what we are to wear?"

"Oh, well, the trains will be altered between now and Christmas," said Mollie in all seriousness, "and you'll want all your furs."

"Very well," said Audrey, "I'll tell my

furrier to send them back in good time. I think the sable coat trimmed with ermine is the sort of thing I shall want."

"You're chaffing, I know," said Mollie. "But I'm awfully glad it's settled about your coming."

"Miss Denver," said Colonel Adair, from the other end of the boat, "are you fond of mediaeval ruins?"

"Rather," said Audrey. "At least I believe I could get quite attached to them, if I knew any outside books."

"There's a fine old castle near here, called Bodiam," he said, "and we want to make an expedition there next Saturday. Will you and your uncle come?"

"Very good, I'm sure," murmured Mr. Baxter, intent on his line. "I and my daughter will be delighted."

"Oh, ah, yes," answered Colonel Adair. "Bring your daughter by all means as well."

"He meant me," whispered Audrey to Mollie. "I am sure he didn't mean to fish for an invitation for Laura, but it can't be helped."

"And your son, too," added Colonel Adair, to Audrey's discomfiture.

"He does not always come down on Saturdays," said Mr. Baxter, "but if he does, I am

sure he will be delighted to accept your kind invitation. He is considered lively."

"Capital," said the hospitable Colonel. "That will round up our party very nicely. I believe there are constant electric trains, and quite a good inn for tea."

Audrey listened in a mixture of vexation and amusement. To think of Alf cracking his jokes gave her a cold shudder, but the vision of Laura, with her airs and graces, her exaggerated fashions, and her social aspirations, was worse.

But her philosophy came to her aid again, and she made up her mind that what could not be cured must be endured, and only hoped that Alf and Laura would not be too impossible.

CHAPTER XX

A PICNIC

"There is a power and magic in the ruined battlement
For which the palace of the present hour
Must yield its pomp, and wait till ages are its dower."

BYRON.

ALF did come down for the next week-end, though happily without Mr. Heskett, and accepted the Adairs' invitation with the proper amount of assumed indifference, masking, as Audrey knew, a genuine eagerness to go.

"I thought you never spoke to a common or garden Mister," he said to her. "I don't care about being introduced to your low friends, you know. Why don't you trot out a lord or two?"

"Sorry," said Audrey, "but I daresay the party could be made up without you."

"Shouldn't like to disappoint 'em now," replied Alf. "Do you think I should wear my straw, or a derby?"

"The straw," said Audrey, "but not the blue and red ribbon."

"Why, it's our tennis club," said Alf, honestly astonished. "I saw a bounder wearing our ribbon the other day, and asked him how he got it, as I know all the members."

"What did he say?" enquired Audrey, with interest.

"He was pretty sick at being spotted, I think," said Alf. "He looked down his nose at first a bit and didn't seem to know what to say. Then the lady with him spoke up and said it was the Guards' colours, or some sauce like that. I *don't* think. But I saw he didn't know what he'd done, so I just laughed it off, and told him in a good-natured way to get another. No use bein' hard on people. He won't do it again in a hurry."

"Very kind of you," said Audrey, in a voice that trembled with mirth. "But I think people don't wear club colours much at the seaside. It fades them," she added, with a burst of inspiration.

So she had the satisfaction of seeing an orthodox black band on the hat. She had, however, no control over the rest of Alf's costume, which consisted of a cinnamon-coloured tweed, with a bright green tie, and socks to

match. But his round face was so full of good humour, and his little eyes twinkling so with fun, that she felt she could not damp his pleasure further.

Laura had been more difficult to manage, and appeared in a very smart, short-waisted long white cloth coat, bought at a sale, and slightly shop soiled. A large white chip hat, and a voluminous white feather boa, with a pair of scarlet shoes and stockings, and long red silk gloves, constituted her idea of a picnic costume.

Audrey hinted that the coat would be rather hot, but Laura clung to it, though in her secret soul she feared the same.

Audrey wore one of her white school cottons, and felt cool and comfortable.

The Adair party came in by tram to start from St. Leonards, and Audrey saw Laura glance at the girls' simple frocks and shady straw hats with some uneasiness.

But Colonel Adair, with his usual kindness of heart, seeing that the strange young lady was rather "out of it" among the merry chatters of the others, attached himself to her, and made himself so agreeable that she began to plume herself upon the Colonel's attentions, and wished Mr. Heskett was there to see them.

Lilian and Mollie found Mr. Alf in close attendance, and after the first shock caused by his appearance, began to find him amusing.

"Audrey's cousin is simply priceless," whispered Mollie to Sybil. "I've never in my life met anything so funny. He looks exactly like a Teddy bear."

Audrey had been rather nervous as to the effect her relatives would produce, but she saw that Alf had more perception than she had given him credit for, and did not at first allow his sense of humour to overstep the limits.

He was so entirely a new type to the girls that they laughed whole-heartedly at his jests, and if Colonel Adair regarded him somewhat fixedly under his grizzled eyebrows, and did not vouchsafe him much notice, Alf was quite satisfied with the approval of the ladies, and rattled on, in perfect satisfaction with himself and his company.

Colonel Adair and Laura got a little separated from the others in the long railway carriage, and as Bob had not come with them, having bicycled over independently, Alf had it all his own way, and Audrey laughed with the rest, wondering if she were an awful prig, as well as all the other unpleasant things she had accused herself of being.

"He really is quite funny," she said to herself. "But I am in terror all the time for fear he will go too far."

Limericks, jokes, riddles, and puns poured forth in ceaseless flow, and when they reached Bodiam they were all quite exhausted with laughter.

Colonel Adair came up, and said quietly to Lilian, "Rather rowdy, weren't you, in the train? I think we must try to suppress our young friend's high spirits a little now."

Lilian smiled and nodded, and when Alf's jovial voice was heard, enquiring if Mollie liked birds, and if so, would she kiss him for a lark, she slipped her arm into her friend's and detained her behind, with a whispered word, while Alf went rollicking on with Harold and some of the younger members of the party.

The mediaeval castle, standing in its moat, apparently as sound and whole as if its years were counted by tens instead of hundreds, struck everybody with admiration.

From outside, every battlement seemed entire, every arrow slit and deeply embedded narrow window perfect, and the grass-grown causeway across the moat, leading under the ancient archway, as whole as in the days of chivalry.

The deep grooves down which the wicked-looking portcullis had ground its way between friends and foes were untouched by time, and the rusty iron points of the great gate itself still threatened the harmless visitors passing beneath.

The girls looked about them, impressed by the atmosphere of antiquity, and interested in the romance which clung round the ivy-grown walls.

But Alf's cheerful voice was heard in anecdote:

"So I said to her, 'You must take off that hat, Miss. It's a very fine hat, but I didn't pay four bob for my seat to look at a hat all afternoon.'

"But she answered me as pert as ninepence, and she wasn't pretty either. 'I shan't take off my hat, young man, and that's flat. The fact is I washed my hair last night, and it's out of my control.'

"I didn't say anything more then, but goin' downstairs after the performance, I found my foot sticking through the flounce of her dress — quite by accident of course.

"'What are you doing?' she says. 'Get off my skirt, please.'

"'Sorry, Miss,' says I. 'The fact is I washed my feet last night, and they've got out of my control.'"

The guardian of the precincts here hurried up, and expressed a wish for more silence. Colonel Adair's grave distinguished appearance, however, reassured her and she withdrew.

Alf, slightly abashed, proceeded to efface himself to some extent, and the graver members of the party began to explore the inside of the castle, which was entirely in ruins overgrown with grass within the surrounding walls.

Audrey heard Lilian expostulating mildly with Mollie, who answered delightedly, "Oh, Lil, I simply can't help it. He is too priceless for words. I believe he'll ask me to change hats before he's done."

"Don't laugh at him too much," said Lilian. "I'm afraid Father doesn't like it."

Audrey's cheeks grew hot with shame, and she fell back unnoticed.

She went on a little grassy terrace overlooking the moat, and leant over the railing.

At sixteen, ridicule is very hard to bear, and she felt she almost hated Alf. After such an exhibition how could she expect the Adairs to go on being intimate with her. Surely Colonel Adair would never allow his daughters to keep her as a friend, with the chance of being thrown with her relations.

And Laura, with her preposterous clothes and her affectations. Audrey wished she was at home again. She wished she had never come out. She wished she had never been born.

Then she heard a loud laugh above her, and looking up, saw Laura and Alf, with Sybil and Harold, on a little platform over her head with an open grating floor. A shower of twigs and stones came rattling about her ears, as she started and jumped back. "All right, Audrey," came Alf's tones. "Was it having a little snooze then? Or was it thinking about its best young man? Cheer up, old girl. I see two bikes on the road."

Poor Audrey retreated from so exposed a position into the great open arena of the castle, and found Colonel Adair with Lilian and Mollie resting in a bit of shade afforded by a tall broken buttress. The girls were sitting on the grass, and the Colonel, leaning against the wall, thoughtfully smoked a cigar. Audrey felt that they must be discussing her cousins' enormities, but found on the contrary that they were deep in theories as to the arrangement of the interior of the castle, and that apparently she and her relations held no place in their thoughts.

Silently she slipped down on the ground beside Lilian, and laid her hot face in the cool grass.

Lilian stroked her cheek with a friendly finger, and they continued their discussion.

Suddenly at the broken archway appeared the familiar figure of Bob Adair, speaking to somebody else behind. And what was he saying? "Father, I've brought an unexpected visitor. Here's Windlesham, of all people. He turned up at Bexhill, just as I was starting, and insisted on coming along too. That's why I'm a bit late."

Gerard had advanced and was shaking hands all round. Audrey sat up, feeling that the sunshine had brightened, and the romance had not entirely left the world.

He looked just the same as usual, unruffled and calm, and was explaining to Colonel Adair how he had been in town on some business for his father, and finding a letter from Bob at his club, had conceived the idea of running down for the Sunday to Bexhill, town being unsupportable in August.

Colonel Adair, though delighted, was evidently rather surprised, and some new ideas began to form themselves in his unsophisticated masculine mind. He glanced at Lilian, graceful and fair, as she chatted pleasantly with the newcomer, but he did not look at the tall, shy schoolgirl, who sat next her, with bright interested eyes.

Gerard turned to Audrey, after a little, saying,

"How are you, Miss Denver? I am slightly hurt that you haven't spoken to me yet."

"You haven't given me a chance," said Audrey. "I want to ask how your mother is, and Marjorie and Alison, and the rabbits and Roger."

"To the best of my knowledge they are all enjoying perfect health," he replied. "There are some noisy people coming downstairs. Shall we make way for them?"

"It is time to go to tea," said Colonel Adair, and Audrey found herself walking with Gerard towards the little inn, while Bob followed with Mollie, and Colonel Adair and Lilian waited for the rest of the party.

Gerard looked rather attentively at Laura and Alf, but seemed to divine with his usual intuition why they were of the party, without explanation, and managed to avoid any introduction without obvious objection.

Alf hardly noticed him, but was rather more subdued, by finding himself in the same room as Colonel Adair, of whom he was slightly in awe, and ate and drank in comparative silence, with only an occasional witticism to Sybil and Harold, who were his principal auditors.

Laura was so much occupied in making herself agreeable to Bob, by whom she sat, that she hardly noticed the addition to the party, especially as Gerard had drawn Audrey and Mollie to a side table.

So the tea went off quite successfully, and the return train was caught without mishap, Gerard and Bob returning as they came.

CHAPTER XXI

ANOTHER FRIEND

"We twain have met like ships upon the sea
That hold an hour's converse, so short, so sweet."

ALEXANDER SMITH.

LOUD and bitter were the reproaches and lamentations of Laura and Alf when, on their return home, they realised that a real live lord had been added to their party without their knowing it.

"I couldn't have believed you were so deep, Audrey," complained Laura. "If there was one person more than another that I wanted to see, it was Lord Windlesham. And how was I to know that that lantern-jawed melancholy Jack was him."

"He isn't lantern-jawed and melancholy," said Audrey indignantly. "I didn't know he was coming, either.

"Well, you might have introduced me, I do think. I suppose you are ashamed of your relations," said Laura, with a toss of her head.

Audrey felt self-convicted, but answered with spirit.

"One can't introduce a man to a lady unless he asks for an introduction. Lord Windlesham didn't ask for one."

"Oh, well," said Laura, highly offended. "Of course a chit of a child like you knows best. But I've been in society a good many more years than you have" ("Hear, hear," from Alf), "and I've never heard that before. Because you happen to know a titled family, that doesn't teach you everything."

"I believe Miss Fenwick told me that," said Audrey. "At least I don't remember who did, if she didn't."

"Stuff and nonsense," responded Laura. "It's all an excuse. You carried on with him at that little table in the window, till I was quite ashamed of you. Running after people indeed. You should never make yourself too cheap. People don't think any better of you for it."

Audrey looked at her cousin before replying, and a sort of sentiment of pity wiped out the irritation she was beginning to feel. Poor Laura, with her red face, her hat all on one side, her hair out of curl, her tight costume, dragging

open at the buttons. Her foolish scarlet high-heeled shoes. Her ill-tempered mouth and seeking eyes. It wasn't worth being angry with her. How could she know? What chance had she ever had? How could she rise above the narrow rules, the restricted etiquette, of her bounded life?

Besides, Alf had taken up the cudgels for her, and made scathing remarks about his sister's appearance, manners, and general style, till Laura was on the verge of tears, and Audrey had to intervene as peacemaker.

Mr. Baxter, who had never been made to understand that he had accepted to go to the party, was slumbering peacefully in the black horse-hair armchair when they returned, and roused at the sound of their voices. He asked a few perfunctory questions about the expedition, and returned to his paper, without hearing the answers.

Presently the usual lodging-house supper was brought in, half a cold leg of mutton, with a bottle of mixed pickles, a cold German sausage, and a piece of stale cheese. A dish of moist greengages, and a black tray of tea-things, were added by the servant, who then turned up the gas over the table and departed.

Alf was the only one who did justice to the meal. Laura was still sore with mortification, and Audrey too preoccupied to eat much.

After supper, Alf, feeling that he had been rather hard on his sister, proposed a turn on the Esplanade by moonlight, and the two went off together, for Laura, to do her justice, never bore malice long, and also fancied herself rather bewitching in the white hat and coat.

Audrey refused to join them, and sat by the open window, whence she could get a sideways glimpse of the sea, with a brilliant path of moonlight across it.

She sat and gazed into the darkness, dreamily thinking over the events of the day, and what a delightful surprise it had been to see one of the dear Dorincourts again.

Meanwhile Gerard was doing much the same thing at Bexhill.

After dinner the Adairs had adjourned to the verandah, where the men smoked, and the ladies sat in peaceful enjoyment of the cool air, after the hot day.

Mrs. Adair had had every detail of the party described to her, and had heard most of Alf's jokes, and seen a life-like imitation of Laura's manners from the irrepressible Mollie.

She shook her head at her, smiling a little, but Mollie discerned the slight disapproval, and excused herself, saying,

"It isn't as if we should ever see them again, dear Mrs. Adair. He was simply too killing, just like 'Arry' in 'Punch,' you know, and such a good-natured piggy little sort of a face he had. And he really wasn't a bit more vulgar than Harold is sometimes." ("Thanks awfully," from Harold.) "It was only that he looked so like a Teddy bear in a green tie, and his awful sister kept on making faces at him, and making him worse than ever. Oh, dear, I have had an amusing afternoon."

"Poor Audrey," said Lilian. "It is rather dreadful for her. I simply can't imagine why she is so different to them."

"She must have had a better class of father," said Bob. "And she hasn't lived much with them. I saw her eyebrows wrinkle up now and again in that way they have. But she never said a word."

"She's a very plucky girl," said Colonel Adair warmly. "I admire her character, but I think we won't see much more of her people."

Gerard's cigarette went out at this point, and he took another. He said nothing as he lay

back in his deck chair, looking at the sea, while the moonlight lit up his clear features and dark intent eyes.

Mrs. Adair glanced at him with affectionate approval.

"What a charming son-in-law he would make," thought maternal affection. But her common-sense replied, "No, Lilian would never suit him. She hasn't the brains. Dear sweet child she is, but she would bore him after a while. There is intellect and ambition behind that dilettante manner. But it is odd his coming down to us like that. Of course it may be all right, but I think we mustn't soar too high, whatever dear Daddy says."

For Colonel Adair, extremely pleased with his unusual flash of perspicacity, had confided his ideas to his wife while dressing for dinner.

After coffee, Gerard rose and proposed a walk, which suggestion Bob eagerly seconded, and the two went off together in the moonlight.

"Nowhere much to go to," said Bob, "just along the road to right or left. Beastly walking on the shingle."

"Come on, dear ass," said Gerard placidly. "I daresay you have more than one pair of boots. I don't see so much of the sea as you

blasé Bexhill men. I want to 'steep my soul in the splendour of the night,' don't you know. Right about face, turn."

And the two tramped along till the firmer ground of the St. Leonard's Esplanade was reached, and after about half a mile more, Bob said,

"That's where those Baxters lodge. Up that side street. Jolly little girl that Miss Denver, eh? Rather a fish out of water with 'em, to my mind."

"You're a very clever chap," said Gerard ironically. "Give us another match."

Sunday afternoon was spent by the Baxter family in strolling up and down the pier, to the cheerfully mundane strains of a band, and Audrey as usual got away to her favourite haunt under the breakwater on the beach.

She was hardly surprised when a light firm step was heard, and Gerard dropped from above into her sheltered corner.

It seemed quite natural, and she looked up with a sweet frank smile, and no embarrassment.

On his side it appeared also quite a matter of course, and he said, as he settled down beside her,

"Pier's too expensive for the likes of me. But there seem plenty of millionaires in these parts."

"Yes indeed, it looks black with people," agreed Audrey, looking across the sea. "The music sounds rather jolly from here."

"Strictly Sabbatarian tunes, I notice," said Gerard, as the strains of "Waltz me round again, Willie," floated towards them.

There was a pause. Then he said, "Miss Denver. Or may I adopt Shakespeare's language and say Audrey? It is so much shorter."

"Why, of course," said Audrey naturally. "All the others do."

"Very well then, Audrey. Why shouldn't you come up to Glentulloch for the rest of your holidays? Or do you think you oughtn't to?"

Audrey raised candid eyes to his. "Honestly," she said, "I think I'd better not. Laura's going away in a week, and it would be too dreary for poor uncle coming home to an empty house. He misses Aunt Edwina dreadfully still."

"Poor old chap," said Gerard sympathetically. "Well, I know it's useless to try and shake your adamantine resolution, but my mother would have liked you to come, and the girls."

"I'm sorry," said Audrey simply, but her tone carried conviction.

"Well, there's always the Christmas holidays to look forward to," said Gerard. "We must

arrange another blizzard I suppose, as nothing less than the forces of nature seem able to influence you."

"I'll come for less than that," she said. "But I am afraid it's getting late. I must go home to tea."

"Can't you come back to the Adairs?" said Gerard invitingly.

Audrey shook her head. She felt she could not invite him back with her. She knew exactly the sort of comments his appearance would excite, but she felt he was waiting for an invitation.

"I should like to know your uncle," was his next remark as he threw a very ineffective stone at a hovering seagull.

"Would you?" was the only remark that occurred to her.

"But as I am evidently not to have that privilege," he said coolly, "I fail to see any necessity for tea. Why not stay here comfortably. Or shall I go and get a tray from the hotel? I can speak a little German."

Audrey's only reply to this pleasantry was to rise and shake the sand from her skirt, while Gerard lay on his back and regarded her quizzically.

"You'll be late too," she said. "Mrs. Adair will think you are lost."

Gerard, seeing she was in earnest, refrained from teasing her any more, and they scrambled back on to the higher beach, and there parted, Audrey turning mournfully homewards, while he set off at a brisk walk towards Bexhill.

"He really is a dear," she reflected. "It is nice seeing any of them, my own dear people. Oh dear, how I wish things weren't so difficult and puzzling. Why can't I be a relation without having to take anything away from them? How I wish I had somebody to talk to about it all. The absurd thing is that the only person in the world I feel would really understand, is Gerard himself. Just like a kind brother he is to me. I wish it wasn't so long to Christmas. But it will be fun having Alison at Miss Fenwick's next term," and cheered by this reflection, she mustered up resolution to partake of tea and shrimps with her uncle and cousins.

CHAPTER XXII

AT THE TOWERS

"Now simmer blinks on flowery braes,
And o'er the crystal streamlet plays."

BURNS.

A YEAR had elapsed. Alison had been very happy at Miss Fenwick's, and she and Audrey had become close and intimate friends.

Audrey was sadly looking forward to leaving her beloved school, but her grief was mitigated by the fact that Alison was to accompany her to Paris for six months "finishing," after their summer in the north. The time had slipped by in the pleasant monotonous duties and pleasures of school life, varied by the delightful holidays, which she had spent mainly with the Dorincourts.

During the last Christmas vacation they had all been to Switzerland for three weeks winter sports, and had enjoyed skating, lüging, and skiing, and where, to everybody's suprise, Gerard had foregone his hunting, and joined the party.

Laura was now Mrs. Heskett, and settled in a very new villa in Hornsey, whence she descended spasmodically upon her father's establishment, "to look after things a bit," generally succeeding in upsetting the servants and destroying Mr. Baxter's slovenly comforts. He and Alf got on very well together, and he seemed quite resigned to the loss of his masterful daughter. Audrey always spent a week or two with him every holidays, but had become so entirely accepted as one of the family party at Dorincourt, that she looked upon it as her home. She had her own room, and her own riding horse, and had made acquaintance with every man, woman, and child on the estate, and every nook and corner of the beautiful old house.

Her secret had never been divulged. Had it become a question of living in Brixton, and only seeing the Dorincourts as casual acquaintances, it is hard to know if her resolution could have stood the test. But her fortunate rescue of little Roger had given her such a claim on his family, and the strong unexplained attraction they mutually felt for each other, made her presence there feel perfectly natural, while the more she saw of them, the less she felt it possible to spring such a mine upon them.

So, when now and then it crossed her mind, she put it on one side, vaguely postponing the idea to a more convenient season.

It was the end of the summer term, and she and Allison were to go together to Cumberland, to stay at the Towers with General Stuart, Mollie Willoughby's grandfather, on their way to Glentulloch, Lord Heversham's shooting box in Scotland.

Audrey was to spend the rest of the holidays there, to make up for having missed it last year.

General Stuart was a hospitable, though somewhat irascible, old gentleman, and the girls were looking forward to their visit, and had been promised some mountaineering.

It was a fine house, but, after the grandeur of Dorincourt, it did not strike terror to Audrey's heart, as it might have done in her Brixton days.

There was quite a large house party, but they were principally relations.

Mollie's father had just been presented with the living by General Stuart, and he and his wife were staying at the Towers with their children while the vicarage was being prepared for their reception. The little girls however were not included in the dining-room party, which the General liked to keep rather formal

and stately. But they inhabited the nursery wing, and their spirits did not seem to suffer from their exclusion from politer circles. They were rosy-faced little maidens with fair pigtails, and all agreed to spoil and mother the little boy cousin, Dorothy Wyndham's brother, who was the grandson and heir of the old General, a pale-faced serious little lad of five years old, with long eyelashes, and old-fashioned manners. Dorothy Wyndham was there too, and her father and mother. Mr. Wyndham, a clean-shaven dry man, was a rather distinguished barrister and K.C., and his wife was a placid woman, who having undergone a good deal of anxiety in her early married life, was blossoming out in the later sunshine of prosperity.

A soldier or two, friends of General Stuart's only son, who had been killed in the Boer war, and the local doctor, made up the dinner party the first night. But they were still a man short, though the General explained that the next day that would be rectified, as Lord Windlesham was joining them.

Alison and Audrey were equally surprised and pleased, and there ensued much discussion of plans and expeditions.

"You had better look sharp and take

advantage of this fine weather, if you are going to climb Scaw Fell," said Mr. Wyndham. "It rains here five days out of seven, you know, and we've only had three wet days this week yet."

"Father," said Dorothy reproachfully, "don't crab our climate. The glass is as high as it can be, and it looks perfectly settled."

"What time does Gerard come?" asked Alison of her host.

"He proposes to arrive in his automobile," replied the General, who never used abbreviations. "He hopes to be here by five o'clock. But I have doubts of the reliability of those machines."

"Oh, Gigs never breaks down," said Alison confidently. "He always gets there every time, as an American girl at school said."

The General, who disapproved of slang, looked grave, and Alison, catching a twinkle in Audrey's eye, resolved to guard her tongue.

"Does he — er — guide his machine himself?" he enquired politely.

"You bet — I mean he can," said Alison. "But he has a capital shover — chauffeur — and it isn't more than sixty or seventy miles. He is sure to get here all right."

In the meanwhile Audrey was discussing with

Mollie, who had gone short of an escort, the plans for the next day.

"We'll all bathe in the morning," Mollie said. "We've got a ripping bathing box on the shore, among the sandhills, and the sea doesn't go out more than two miles, with luck. Can you swim?"

"Yes," said Audrey, "I'm very fond of it."

"Well, you'll have to walk a bit for it," said Mollie. "I break down with nervous exhaustion myself by the time I get up to my waist, but it's all right when you get there."

"We might take our lunch, and spend the day there, some of us," said Dorothy Wyndham, joining in the conversation. "The children love it, and we can sketch and read, and go to sleep in the sandhills, if we feel inclined."

"It sounds simply delightful," said Audrey. "I've hardly ever bathed in the sea. But I haven't got a gown."

"Lot's there," said Mollie.

"I want to climb a Cumberland mountain," remarked Alison. "I've brought my Swiss alpenstock."

"We must wait till your brother comes," said Dorothy. "We think of an expedition up Scaw Fell on Friday, if it is not too far."

"Scaw Fell is the mountain where the Pillar rock is, isn't it?" enquired Alison.

"Yes, but we can't attempt that," said Dorothy. "It is very difficult and dangerous."

"I'm rather afraid of Scaw Fell," observed Audrey. "I'm not very good at heights, they make me giddy, and I think I should prefer to sit ingloriously at the bottom, and prepare a sumptuous meal against your return."

"Oh, nonsense," said Dorothy. "We shouldn't enjoy it a bit without you. Besides, we might come down a different way, and then what would become of your sumptuous meal?"

"I should be reluctantly obliged to eat it up myself," said Audrey gravely, but the others all protested against any such plan.

"I know," said Mollie. "Don't let's bother with Scaw Fell. We'll all go to tea on Irton Pyke."

"Oh no," said Alison. "Never mind Audrey, she's talking through her hat. I mean," with a scared look at the old General, who was fortunately engaged in conversation, "she's only pretending she's frightened. She climbed like a chamois in Switzerland."

"Yes, and it's exactly that way that I found out how much I disliked it," said Audrey.

"But don't let me take such a prominent part in this conversation. You all settle something, and I'll fall in with it, if I can."

"Not Irton Pyke then?" said Dorothy.

"Too tame," said Mr. Wyndham. "Why not try Great Gable? It isn't nearly so serious a climb as Scaw Fell, and can be done in three or four hours. There are some magnificent views there."

"Is that the pyramid shaped mountain at the head of Wastwater?" asked Alison. "Yes, that looks quite a good climb. I like a mountain I shall know again when I get down. I vote for Great Gable."

Just then Mrs. Wyndham gave up trying to catch Alison's eye, and rose without doing so.

They had a musical evening. One of the strange soldiers, Mr. Hattering, sang, and Audrey played. Mollie and Dorothy sang duets, and the old General beat time with his stick on the floor, and demanded encores.

The other man, a Major Grey, sat next Alison, and confided in her what a change there had come over the old gentleman since his reconciliation with his daughters. "His son, Stephen, a rattling good fellow, was a friend of mine," he explained. "It used to worry him a lot, the

family rows and all that. He said he'd give anything to put it right. Poor chap, he did in the end put it right, but he lost his life for it."

"I daresay that was what he would have wished," said Alison softly.

"Lucky there's an heir," continued Major Grey, after a pause. "The General thinks a lot of the family tree, and all that. Do you know this country, Lady Alison?"

"Not a bit," she said. "I know Scotland and Yorkshire, but this seems a little different from both."

"Warmer than Yorkshire. More colour than Scotland," said the Major briefly.

The next day both descriptions were verified. The party were conveyed in the motor to the shore, a wild and desolate stretch of beach, but with a certain charm of its own. The flat shore, sloping very gradually from shingle to sand, down to the opal sea, lying still under a faint blue sky. The pale shapes of the sandhills, with the lilac shadows in their soft hollows, were sparsely fringed with wiry blue-grey grass, among which grew fairy pansies and tiny pink sea campion. Behind them rose the exquisite range of hills, amethyst and grey, with patches of cool green and heather purple in the foreground, and

here and there the pale gold of a ripening cornfield.

The misty distances, the softened pearly lights over the sea, and the changing shadows of the hills were very lovely, and Audrey sat in despair, her sketching block on her knee, while Dorothy touched in a delicate clear outline, and Mollie incited the younger ones to wild rolls and romps, down the miniature precipices and crevasses of the sandhills.

Presently the tide was judged to be high enough for bathing, and Audrey and Alison, with Mollie and some of the little ones, had a delicious dip. Audrey caused much alarm and excitement by her swimming powers, calling forth to her embarrassment a full description by Alison of her rescue of Roger, to a deeply interested audience.

Meanwhile, Dorothy and the children's nurse had prepared the "sumptuous meal," and so the time wore on.

After lunch, the girls made another attempt at sketching, and with their wet hair spread out to dry, sat on the warm sand, drowsing or conversing dreamily. Suddenly a brindled Aberdeen approached and barked ostentatiously from a little distance, while in the background a figure in

light flannels with a Panama hat, was seen taking a leisurely course in their direction.

"Oh, bother, here's a strange young man coming," said Mollie. "I ask you, am I in a condition to receive strange young men?"

"Certainly not," said Dorothy. "Go back to the box, and do your hair. You can keep behind the sandhills."

Mollie, followed by Celia and the two next sisters, accordingly crawled on hands and knees in procession round the sandbank, and would have got off unperceived but for the officious conduct of Orpheus, who danced a war dance in front of them, with shrill barks, to their inexpressible fury.

His master, however, coming up, looked industriously in the other direction, and taking off his hat to the remaining slightly disconcerted damsels, sat down without invitation, took the youngest Willoughby on his knee, and made himself at home.

"How did you get here?" demanded Alison.

"It occurred to me to ask the way," he said. "I found the house empty, and I presume swept and garnished, and followed you up. I thought you would enjoy your tea better if you had it with me."

CHAPTER XXIII

MOUNTAINEERING

"Mountains are the beginning and end of all natural scenery."

RUSKIN.

THE Great Gable expedition having been decided upon, the spirits of the party fell considerably when the morning dawned grey and sunless, with a sprinkling of fine rain.

When the girls assembled in the morning room after breakfast, they were rather a doleful company, though Celia strummed cheerfully on the piano, and did her best to lighten the gloom.

Only Audrey was conscious of a happy contentment of spirit, that made her satisfied with any circumstances. She did not know herself why she felt it didn't matter in the least what they did, but she could not join in the chorus of grumbles, and set herself so placidly to the manufacture of paper frogs for the children, that she roused the ire of the others.

"Audrey," said Alison indignantly, "I wonder you aren't ashamed of yourself. You haven't backed us up in the least. Was there ever such a horrible, hideous, howling wilderness of a day? You must agree with me, or I'll throw this cushion at you."

"Yes," chimed in Mollie. "Look at her sitting there so prim and contented, while we rage furiously round. Audrey, if there is one thing I do hate, it's a superior woman."

"How dare you call me such a thing," said Audrey, roused. "I am only suiting myself to circumstances, and producing frogs to match the weather. Besides, I believe it's going to clear. See that blue spot."

"Enough for one, but not enough for two," quoted Alison, returning to the window. "Oh dear, what shall we do, and I've put on my embroidered linen, and it will get all draggle-tailed. Why, oh, why, didn't I bring my new Burberry, instead of sending it on to Glentulloch?"

"You had better wear an old serge," said Dorothy, "and take something warm to put on at the top. It's awfully cold there sometimes."

"But what's the use of talking, when we can't go at all?" groaned Mollie. "I shall come and play beggar-my-neighbour with the kids."

"Stephen can play beggar-my-neighbour," said Phyllis confidentially to Audrey. "Only he always thinks the kings are knaves."

"Rather awkward sometimes," said Audrey. "Here's another frog finished. Put his eyes in, Margaret. Just two ink blobs. Isn't he lovely?"

"What's the time?" asked Alison.

"Only half-past ten," replied Dorothy comfortingly. "Lots of time for it to clear yet. We don't start till half-past eleven. I think it's lighter already."

"Come and have a knock up at billiards," said Mollie to Alison. "It'll help to pass the time."

"The men are all there," objected Alison.

"Well, they won't eat us if they are," retorted Mollie. "They are not playing, anyhow. We could hear the balls from here if they were."

"Yes, do go," said Dorothy, "and leave me and Audrey in peace. Take Celia with you. Audrey's got the little ones quite happy, and I want to write up my diary."

So for ten minutes peace reigned, and Audrey manufactured frogs of all sizes, in response to a practically unlimited demand, until the table was covered with them.

The door opened, and Gerard entered cautiously.

"May I come in?" he said. "The presence of Stephen reassures me. From the sounds we heard below I feared it was a Suffragette meeting."

"Oh, that was Celia," said Dorothy. "She was singing, 'I'm afraid to go home in the dark,' and the little ones were dancing, until Audrey invented these animals to keep them quiet."

"I could imagine myself in Egypt," said Gerard. "We have suffered an invasion, and been ignominiously routed. Grey and Hallerton have capitulated, and are now playing pool, but I fled to cover."

He sat down beside Audrey, and began to build a pyramid of frogs, with the delighted assistance of the children.

"When I was a little frog,—boy, I mean," he informed them, "I had a great ambition to become an engine driver. So I borrowed a can of pink paint, and gave a dinner party."

"Who came to it?" enquired Stephen, with breathless interest.

"All sorts of creeping things," said Gerard. "Some of them wore hats, but some only chewed cabbage leaves."

"Was that the dinner party?" said Margaret.

"Oh dear no," said Gerard. "We had a very good French cook, you know, and he made us some perfectly delicious gollybobs."

"What *are* those?" asked Phyllis.

"That's a secret," said Gerard gravely. "The awkward thing was I couldn't remember all their names, and so they said I must wear a green feather, and sit on the soup tureen."

"What did you do wiv the pink paint?" enquired Stephen.

"Gave it away in charity," said Gerard. "You can't think how nice I looked in that green feather. And all my relations said there was a great deal of good in me really."

"What did you do at dinner?" said Stephen.

"Played marbles, mostly," said Gerard. "But the chimney smoked so, it was perfectly awful, and then the band played, 'Waltz me round once again, Willie,' and all the stags began to blow their horns. You never heard such a row. Miss Denver, it's rude to laugh. I shall stop talking."

"Oh no, do go on," begged the children.

"I'm offended," said Gerard.

"Audrey, be quiet," ordered Phyllis.

"Who gave you leave to call her Audrey?" enquired Dorothy, whose diary seemed to have become rather neglected.

"Never mind, do go on," implored Stephen, dancing on Gerard's toes.

"Well, where was I?" said Gerard.

"The stags were blowing their horns," prompted Phyllis.

"But the king stopped that. He said it was time for a little recitation, so Madame gave us 'The death of Nelson,' until all the toadstools exploded, and the sun came out, and we all started to go up Great Gable."

And Gerard stood up, emptying the children on to the floor, and Dorothy and Audrey suddenly discovered that the clouds had magically cleared away.

"I'd wather go on wiv the story," said Stephen.

"We will hope to meet again," said Gerard. "At present I must run and get my nurse to button my boots."

"I wears lace boots," observed Stephen.

"Ah, but I can't afford them," said Gerard sadly. "Real lace is so expensive, and I really couldn't wear imitation. Don't you agree with me?"

"Gerard, don't puzzle the child," said Audrey. "His poor little brain is whirling already."

"So is mine," said Dorothy. "How you can

talk such nonsense, Lord Windlesham, I can't imagine."

"Who can define nonsense?" asked Gerard. "What is nonsense to some people is inspiration to others. There are even people who believe in spirit-rapping, and vegetarianism."

"I hear the motors coming round," exclaimed Dorothy. "Audrey, we must fly."

As the cheerful company started, the sun shone out brilliantly, reflecting from every wet glistening leaf and puddle, till the world seemed crystallised. Big white woolly clouds slowly bundled across the cobalt blue sky, casting fleeting shadows on the rugged sides of the hills.

Their road lay beside Wastwater, one of the least frequented and wildest of the English lakes. It lay like a sheet of polished blue steel, under the frowning Screes, which fell smooth and sheer down to its surface, carrying the imagination to unknown depths below it.

All that side lay in deep shadow, purple and black, and the reflection in the water looked dark and forbidding, reminding the looker on of the many tragedies connected with the spot. But the other side, where the white road ran, following the contour of the lake, was flooded with sunshine, and the green fells rose in softly undulating

waves, some covered with bracken, through which peeped grey masses of granite, and others clothed in brilliant green or orange mosses and lichen.

At the head of the lake, towered the triangular mass of Great Gable, on the right the huge humped shoulder of Scaw Fell, with Scaw Fell Pike beyond, and Yewbarrow stood among his peers on the left, Kirk Fell, Middle Fell, Scat-allan and Red Pike, all grey and green.

The chatter of the young folks was hushed for a while, as they sped along the road towards Wasdale Head, through the wild and solitary country.

The tiny church, peering out from its secluded valley, like some timid little animal, half con-cealed, but constrained to prick one ear over its shelter, the cluster of grey stone and white-washed cottages, and the little inn, were soon reached.

The motors were unloaded, and the ascent began. The climbers consisted of Mr. Wyndham, Mollie, and her tomboy sister Celia, Dorothy, Alison, and Audrey, Major Grey, Mr. Hattering, and Gerard.

The ascent was not very toilsome at first, and it was pleasant enough walking over the

short turf, with occasional boulders cropping up, and now and then a tract of shale.

As they got higher, the view widened, and the girls paused as much for the enjoyment of the prospect as for breath, so often, that they were called to order by Mr. Wyndham, saying they would never get there.

They then climbed steadily onwards, Audrey finding Gerard always somewhere in her neighbourhood, helpful and ready, though his irresponsible talk kept the whole party amused, and he singled out nobody for special attention.

The sun went in and out, and the big woolly clouds accumulated, till Mr. Wyndham glanced a little anxiously at the sky, and at his watch now and then.

Audrey, toiling conscientiously upward, with her eyes fixed on the track, suddenly felt a drop of rain, and almost instantly a waterproof cape fell round her shoulders, and covered her up. She had hardly time to protest, when a storm of wind and rain burst upon them, and a scene of confusion ensued. They had come more or less prepared, and macintoshes were hastily unstrapped, and umbrellas opened, while everybody made for the nearest shelter.

They were on a rather exposed part of the

mountain, but there were granite rocks available for shelter on the windward side. Audrey and Alison found themselves crouching under the same one, breathless with laughter and exertion, and Major Grey made his way to them.

They sat together, huddled up under the lee of the big boulder, sheltering as best they could, squeezed into the smallest possible compass. Audrey looked round for Gerard, but he was not to be seen.

"Alison," she said, "had your brother more than one macintosh with him?"

"I don't think so," replied Alison. "Why?"

"Oh dear, then I'm afraid he's given me his," said Audrey in a tone of distress. "I was quite all right in my aqua-scutum, but he put this over me too, and disappeared. I must give it him back."

She craned round the edge of the rock. Near them stood another crag, behind which sheltered Mr. Wyndham, with the two Willoughby girls and Mr. Hattering.

"I can't see him," she said. "There seems to be rather a fog coming on."

"I hope not," said Major Grey. "A fog up here is no joke. But the rain is stopping. Let's get out of this."

They re-assembled, and Mr. Wyndham counted heads, with the result that Dorothy Wyndham was missing, and Gerard.

The fog thickened, and he looked rather anxious.

"Let's give them a call," he said, and they shouted together. But nothing was heard, and he said, "I'm afraid we must give up any more hope of getting to the top today. These fogs sometimes last a long time. We must get down as quickly as we can. Keep all together. Dorothy knows the way all right, and if she is with Windlesham, he will take care of her."

"Let's give them another call," said Mollie, but again there was no response.

After a pause Major Grey said, "Curious how a fog deadens sound. I remember once when I was in the Andes — What was that? A cry?"

They all listened, but it was only the bleat of a mountain sheep.

Mr. Wyndham marshalled his party, and moving carefully, following the track they had taken in the morning, he brought them all down again safely to the little inn, but still the two missing ones had not appeared.

"They've taken the wrong track down," said

Mollie. "There are several different ones. Let's go and eat our sandwiches in the coffee room, and wait for them. They'll be here directly."

But the scratch meal was not a very cheerful one, and Mr. Wyndham looked constantly out at the window.

It was now pouring with rain, and the outlook was most dismal.

"I think we must all pack into the big motor," he said, "if we can, and leave Windlesham's car here for them to come back in. There's no use our all waiting for them. If we can't all get in I'll walk home."

"I'll join you," said Major Grey, "and they can pick us up when they pass us."

So a rather depressed party was despatched homewards in the roomy motor, and arrived about four o'clock.

Major Grey and Mr. Wyndham returned an hour later, but there was still no sign of the absentees.

Everybody told the others stories of similar adventures, and Mollie related how Dorothy had once before been lost on the fells, and given them a great fright. Though all the tales had cheerful endings, a cloud of depression hung

over them all, and the formal dinner, which nobody dared to shirk, was a burdensome duty. Poor Mrs. Wyndham looked very white, at the head of the table, and the old General was gruffer than ever.

However, as the meal proceeded, the welcome sound of a motor horn was heard, and the grave butler announced to his master, "Lord Windlesham and Miss Wyndham have returned, sir. But they are extremely wet, and will not come in till they have changed." He then stood aside to let Mrs. Wyndham pass, who for once infringed the General's strict rules, and left the room without apology.

But the General only said, "Very well, Matthews, you may bring in the next course," and the conversation broke out with relieved vigour, while, though Mollie fidgeted and looked imploring, the rest of the party had to stifle their curiosity while the long elaborate meal wore to its end.

However, in a short time Gerard slipped in, and saying quietly to the butler, "Go on where you are, I don't want soup or fish," unfolded his napkin, and began his dinner so unconcernedly that at first his entrance was not observed, except by Audrey.

She said to him, under her breath, "What did happen? Everybody was getting quite frightened."

"No wonder," said Gerard genially. "You have my profoundest sympathy. But it was only that we were a little too cocksure of knowing our way, and took an absolutely wrong track. Miss Wyndham's umbrella was the real culprit, though I'm afraid the General will blame *me*. I nearly brought it in to screen me from his eye. I shall feel stronger when I have eaten something. At present I am shaking like an aspen."

"Go on," said Audrey. "Tell me what happened."

"Well, it can't defend itself," said Gerard, "so I will speak the truth. It flew out of her hand in that squall, and I went to get it, while she waited for me. It behaved as one possessed, and led me a pretty dance. But my strength of character eventually conquered, and I captured it. So then we discovered that you had been careless enough to forget our existences, and we wandered down the mountain side, lamenting the decadence of friendship, till we fetched up at some unholy spot, about four miles from Wastdale, whence we had to tramp back."

"Poor Dorothy!" said Audrey. "How tired she must be!"

"Well, of course, she had the benefit of my conversation, which was most sustaining," said Gerard. "But a day in bed will make her all right. She is more or less used to these adventures, she tells me."

CHAPTER XXIV

A CONFESSION

"The sweet youth's in love."

SHAKESPEARE.

A FEW days later, Gerard sought his father in the smoking room of the little grey stone house, known as Glentulloch Lodge, where the Dorincourt party were now settled.

It had originally been only a bachelor's rough shooting box, but Lord Heversham was old-fashioned enough to prefer his pleasures in the company of his wife and family, and had altered and enlarged it to accommodate them.

But it was a small place still, and its deep windows, low ceilings and thick walls, made the rooms look even smaller than they were.

But there was a wild freshness in the moorland air, and a delightful freedom from all social obligations, that gave Lady Heversham a real holiday. She loved the little spot, and would

not have missed her annual sojourn there for any amount of smart visits.

The house had no flower garden, and stood on the bare wild moor, with tracts of pink and purple heather spreading on every side, a tinkling brown burn singing its cheerful song, as it tumbled over in miniature cascades a stone's throw from the door; and ranges of blue mountains rising all round.

It stood ten miles from the station, and as it hardly boasted of a drive to be distinguished from a sheep track, motors and carriages were all left at home, and a big springless kind of waggonette accommodated the sportsmen and the family alike.

There was good grouse shooting, and sometimes a stag, but there was no room for large shooting parties, and Lord Heversham used to go out with his boys and an occasional school or college friend of theirs, with much content.

Gerard had returned the previous night from his Cumberland visit, and the girls, Alison and Audrey, were expected in a couple of days.

Lord Heversham looked up from the "Field" as his son entered with a rather unwonted air of pre-occupation, and said, "Are you disengaged,

Sir? I should like a word or two with you, if we are not likely to be interrupted."

"Why, of course," said Lord Heversham, surprised, and turning half round to look at him.

Gerard, usually so calm, appeared for once to be rather flurried. He struck a match to light his cigarette, and blew it out instantly. He struck another, which broke in half, then a third which refused to light. He dropped the box with an impatient exclamation, and taking up an ivory paper-knife, began to bend it as far as it would go. Then looking up with a start to find his father's amused eyes on him, he laid it down, and began to finger the ornaments on the mantelshelf, still without speaking.

"If I didn't know you as well as I do, my boy," said Lord Heversham, "I should suspect you of a desire to confess a crime."

"Well, it isn't exactly that," said Gerard, with a forced effort after his usual light manner. "But your intuition is correct. I have a confession to make to you, and I don't think you'll quite like it."

Lord Heversham looked a little anxious. "Well," he said, "there are usually two things only that a young man wants to confess about.

I know the first is out of your line, so I suppose it's the old story, 'cherchez la femme.'"

"Exactly," said Gerard, this time succeeding in lighting a cigarette, and smoking rather rapidly. "The fact is, father, I've gone and fallen in love."

"Oh, well, you'll get over it," said Lord Heversham, consolingly. "These attacks are not usually fatal at one-and-twenty. Who is the lady?"

"Father," said Gerard, "you mustn't chaff me about it. I've known it a long time, but I gave it a fair trial, to make sure. And now I'm quite sure."

"Is it that pretty Miss Adair?" said his father, "or one of those nice grand-daughters of peppery old Stuart's?"

"No," said Gerard, "none of those. I know you'll be surprised, father, but the fact is,— it's Miss Audrey Denver."

"*What!*" said Lord Heversham. "Audrey Denver! That child! Why, Gerard, she's hardly out of the nursery."

"I know," said Gerard. "It's a great pity she wasn't born a bit sooner. But there it is."

"Why — why — why —" said his father, stammering in his surprise. "I never heard such

nonsense. You to fall in love with a little girl in pinafores. Gerard, I thought you had more sense. Not but what she's a dear little girl, and uncommonly plucky. We shall never forget what we owe her. But to marry her. The thing's out of the question."

"I was afraid you'd take it that way," said Gerard. "But I hope you will agree to it. There's nobody else in the world for me. Though, 'pon my word," he added with a touch of humour, "I can't imagine why it should be so. I've tried hard enough, but the thing's too strong for me, it is indeed."

"But, my dear fellow," said his father, "think of the connection. Her family and all that. Can you face such relations?"

"They were a strong argument for the Opposition," admitted Gerard sadly. "But the thing goes on. I can't think of anybody else. I know she's young, inexperienced, immature, if you like. But you know how fond Mother and the girls are of her. You know yourself how much you like her. We all begin young, you know. There's more sense and character in that child than in fifty modern young ladies. She'll be a noble woman. Father, don't refuse me your consent. I've never asked you any-

thing before, and my whole life's happiness depends on this."

Lord Heversham regarded the end of his cigar with profound attention. It was quite true, he thought. Here was his son, his eldest and most beloved child, asking him for the first favour he had ever desired of him, and asking him with a depth of earnestness in his young voice, that spoke for itself.

Gerard had always been such a thoroughly satisfactory boy. Clever, hard-working, conscientious, a loving and loyal son and brother, clear-headed and high-principled.

He had never been in serious debt, got into discreditable scrapes, or made undesirable friends. Without being in any sense a prig, or a pedant, his father knew how much deep feeling and sound judgment lay behind his cheerful flippant manner.

And here was this boy, heir to his name and estates, the future head of one of the noblest families in England, wanting to marry a little girl out of Brixton, with no connections, no traditions, no advantages. Her vulgar relations would overrun the house, and make acquaintance with his carefully guarded girls.

Oh, the thing could not be contemplated.

Gerard must marry into some family of like history to his own, of lofty lineage, and distinguished public service. His children must not be ashamed of their maternal relations.

Granted that Audrey herself was astonishingly superior to her people, the taint remained, and might crop up anywhere.

He looked up. Gerard had let his cigarette out, and was sitting with it loosely held in his fingers, one knee crossed over the other, gazing out of the window with a yearning look in the keen true eyes.

It touched his father's heart. How could he refuse him. But how could he allow it? He resolved to temporise. "Gerard," he said gently, "this is a great surprise, and you must forgive me if I add, disappointment to me. I had naturally hoped for something better for you. It is the first time a Dorincourt has married — well, I won't say beneath him, — but not to that equality of rank which goes far to make a happy marriage in our class."

Gerard nodded gravely.

"Also," his father continued, "the young lady is so very young. There has hardly been time yet for her to develop her character. Something of it we know. We know she has personal

courage and readiness of resource. She is unselfish and sweet tempered, and has had a good education, besides showing a natural refinement which is surprising with her birth and position. But you must see yourself, all this is hardly enough. I will not withhold my consent absolutely. In fact I have of course no legal right to do so."

Gerard made a movement to speak, but checked himself, and Lord Heversham smiled and went on. "But I think it is not unreasonable to ask you to wait for at least a year before taking any definite steps. Miss Denver is seventeen. You are only just of age. A year's probation will be wise in every way, and I feel sure your own good sense will agree to that."

Gerard sighed as he threw the ill-used cigarette into the empty fireplace.

"It's all very well to talk of good sense, but a man's feelings aren't always guided by that. A year's a precious long time, Dad."

"It will pass," said his father. "And I think that as you have done me the honour of consulting me you will be willing to abide by my wishes. Wait a year, go abroad, travel, shoot, see something of the world, leave the young lady free

to know her own mind, and when you return, come and see me again. If, in the interval, your feelings have changed, nobody need ever know what has passed between us, and if they remain the same, well, we can discuss the matter again. I will put no obstacles in your way, if your heart is still set upon this marriage.

"But, mind, you are not to speak to Miss Denver before you go. You have not already done so, I presume?" he added, in a different tone.

"No," said Gerard, rather heavily, "I have not. She is so unconscious that I never get an opportunity. But in any case I should have felt it right to consult you first."

"That's right," said Lord Heversham. "Now, my dear boy, it's time to dress for dinner. We'll talk over your travels afterwards. A year's tour is no such great penalty. And you can have some big game shooting. I should recommend you to start at once to see about your outfit. We will take care of Miss Denver, never fear."

Gerard rose, and with the light gone out of his face, turned to leave the room. But his heart smote him as he saw his father's sad look, and he said impulsively, "I'm awfully sorry, Sir, to disappoint you in this matter. But I'm

perfectly sure you'll confess that I've made no mistake. If Miss Denver does me the honour to accept me, you will never have any reason to regret such a connection, vulgar cousins and all," he ended more lightly. "And I agree I'd better be off. I can't be quite sure of myself when she is here with us all again."

The two men shook hands and parted. Gerard, relieved that the sentence was not final, but looking forward to his year's banishment with small anticipations of pleasure, and his father feeling that pang of heartache which must come to all parents when the children begin to find their happiness apart from them.

Lord Heversham went to the window and looked out, and as he drew the heavy curtain aside, he suddenly discovered little Roger, curled up in the deep window seat, his head back against the wall, fast asleep, his book slipping off his knee.

He woke with a start, and blushed crimson at his father's grave face.

"How long have you been here, Roger?"

"Ever since tea, Father. Oughtn't I to come? There was nowhere else quiet."

"Have you been listening to what we were saying?"

Roger lifted candid eyes. "I heard Gigs and you talking at first, but I fink I went to sleep pretty soon."

Lord Heversham hesitated a moment, as to whether to caution the child. But thinking it would only fix it in his memory, he refrained, trusting to the heedlessness of eight years old to obliterate the remembrance of anything he had heard; if he had heard anything important, he decided to leave it alone. Certainly Roger's innocent face spoke for him, and his father dismissed him with a pat on the curly head, saying only, "Bodge, remember that if gentlemen overhear anything accidentally, they don't repeat it, any more than if it was told to them direct."

To which Roger replied dutifully, "Yes, Father, I quite understand," and ran away.

CHAPTER XXV

BANISHMENT

"And sighed my English breath in foreign lands,
Eating the bitter bread of banishment."

SHAKESPEARE.

WHEN Alison and Audrey arrived at Glentulloch, they were told that Gerard was in London, purchasing his outfit for a year's tour round the world.

Alison lamented and grumbled at the spoiling of their holidays, and the general flatness of things without the beloved Gigs to keep them going, but Marjorie, who felt it the most, took a cheery view.

"Just think of all the jolly things he'll bring us back," she said. "He's going to Canada and Japan and China and everywhere, besides all the skins and heads he'll get shooting."

"One can buy all those Eastern curios and things in the Oriental department of the Stores at eightpence three farthings each, just as good," complained Alison.

"Unsentimental female," said Dick, who would have given his head to go too. "Just think of the associations and all that sort of thing."

"All very well for Gigs," she said. "But I would just as soon have a sandal-wood stamp box from Gorringe's bazaar, and have kept him at home these holidays."

"Father thought he had better go off at once," said Marjorie, "as Lord Lenthall and Mr. Mackenzie were starting next week, and they could go a long way together, as far as British Columbia anyhow."

"If he could have waited till Audrey and I went to Paris, he might have gone as far as Dieppe or Calais with us, which I am sure he would have liked just as much," argued Alison.

Marjorie laughed. She may have had some inkling of affairs, but she kept her own counsel, as a good sister should. But she glanced across at Audrey, who had not joined in the discussion, with a kind look in her bright eyes.

The girls had not long arrived and had not taken off their outdoor things when Dick had sprung the news upon them.

Audrey was standing by the window, tall and slight in her neat brown coat and skirt, slowly

pulling off her gloves and straightening each finger with punctilious care. The animation with which she had entered had died out of her face, and she gazed across at the blue mountains with a rather pathetic droop at the corners of her mouth, but without saying anything.

Lady Heversham was officiating at the tea table, which was for once laid indoors, in consideration of a sharp shower that had just fallen, and she too glanced up at Audrey.

But Dick created a diversion by observing, "Of course it's pretty beastly without old Gerard, but we shall have another spare room, and we'll have some jolly fellows up to carry the lunch baskets, and fall in love with Marge."

Marjorie was so accustomed to this sort of speech that she "didn't turn a hair," and slipping her arm through Audrey's, woke her from her abstraction by some playful remark about introducing her to some real Scotch "baps."

Audrey roused herself, and going over to Lady Heversham, sat down beside her, and answered her questions about the journey in her usual quiet manner, but without the touch of dry humour that was habitual to her.

Lady Heversham felt a little uneasy. "Poor child," she thought, "I do trust it isn't *that*.

I am thankful this journey has been decided upon in time."

For mothers have intuitions as well as sisters, even if they are not in possession of facts.

Audrey was soon overwhelmed with a cascade of children, who entered in a disorderly mob and captured her, and as she laughed and talked with the rabbits and Roger, the depression seemed to pass away, and she asked questions and ate "baps" in a normal manner.

"Oh, by the way, Mother darling," said Alison, "Captain Adair's coming up a day sooner if it's all the same to you. I heard from Lilian that he was up north and it fitted him better, so I told her I was sure it would be all right."

This time Lady Heversham glanced at Marjorie, who with a rather heightened colour was spreading butter on a scone for Roger, and sighed a small sigh, thinking how quickly girls grew up. But she answered Alison cheerfully, "Oh dear, yes, there's plenty of room. Isn't there anybody else you'd like to have?"

"Why not old Framlingham?" suggested Dick. "I rather like him. He tipped me a fiver last holidays. A jolly decent old chap. Hullo, Marge, what's the matter?"

Lady Heversham looked amused. "I don't

think the shooting's good enough for Lord Framlingham," she said; "I mean somebody younger to play with you and the girls."

"Oh, of course," said Dick acutely, "if Marjorie has given him the boot, we must try another."

"Dick," said his mother, rather gravely, "give Audrey some cake. You must be host now, you know, instead of Gerard."

Dick heard the little reproof in her tone, and meekly did as he was told, without any more embarrassing remarks.

Then Lord Heversham came in, in his rough shooting clothes, and sat down next to Audrey. He was so gentle to her and so evidently pleased to see her, that her heart warmed to him, and she felt again what dear delightful friends they were.

They were a very cheerful party at tea. Exigencies of space forbade the existence of a schoolroom, so the whole party took their meals together, and though the three younger ones had a separate table, with the orthodox plates of thick bread and butter and jam, it was generally found so difficult to prevent the elders from sharing in the more satisfying if less refined viands, that the custom had become a distinction without a difference.

The rabbits were growing into tall slips of girls, with their fair manes tied decorously back during the day, though they were still brushed into loose silky waves in the evening.

Roger was to go to school next term, as he was nearly nine years old.

They had already spent a week at Glentulloch, and were busy describing to Audrey their various pursuits and haunts, while Alison asked interested questions. "Is the wood hut still standing? And has the Virginia creeper grown we planted over it?" she said.

"Rather," said Roger. "The rain comes in a bit at the corner of the roof, but the forester is going to mend it, and the heather is growing first rate all over it. The Virginia creeper has nearly covered up the window, but Mother hasn't brought up her garden clippers, and Nanna won't lend us the nursery scissors."

"I should think not," said Alison. "I'll come along tomorrow with Dick's best knife."

"Thanks awfully," said Dick.

"What is the wood hut?" asked Audrey.

She was answered by all the children at once, how Gerard had made a dear little house in the larch plantation, for a birthday present to Pat last year, and how they had planted a

garden round it themselves, and Dick had made a table and benches, and how they had tea there on fine days, and how Marjorie had suggested growing heather on the peat roof, and how that nobody could find it now, it looked so like the rest of the wood.

Audrey felt rather drawn by the picture, and said so. The children promptly invited her to tea the next day if fine, and she as promptly accepted.

"But you'll have to take an 'orrible oath, you know," said Roger.

"Dear me," said Audrey, "how do you do it?"

"You know we are all free foresters," explained Pat, "and nobody knows how to find the lodge, unless they have the secret. Gigs thought of that. It's awful fun."

"We'll nish — nishiate — what's the word, Mother? We'll nishiate Audrey tomorrow."

"Does it hurt much?" enquired the novice, in rather a trembling voice.

"You wait and see," said Roger sternly, but soft-hearted Honor explained in a whisper that it was only saying things like prayers, and didn't hurt at all.

"Are there any wild raspberries left, or have you eaten them all?" enquired Alison.

"Lots," she was assured. "Almost enough to make into jam, Nanna said. But they are our own raspberries, Father said, and we can have them all."

The sudden depression that had so unaccountably fallen upon Audrey had lifted, and she was as full of pleasure and plans as the children.

Marjorie also seemed remarkably cheerful, and at last the party became so uproarious, that Lady Heversham proposed an adjournment out of doors, as the rain had ceased.

Audrey exclaimed in delight at the sea of purple heather growing almost up to the door, and extending for miles, with here and there a few larches, or a group of birches, or a clump of mountain ash, breaking the monotony of line.

They showed her the little burn, running clear brown from the peat, and the tiny tarn or loch, which received it in the hollow behind the house. The children had a flat-bottomed boat on the lake, but Marjorie vetoed a water party, as it was all so wet.

Roger's face fell at this, but Marjorie reminded him that there were five more happy weeks to come and many more opportunities.

The twilight was beginning to close in, as the August evenings are not very long in the north,

and they all returned to the house, to play pool and pyramids until it was time to dress for dinner.

Poor Gerard, yawning in his stall in a London theatre, thought with longing of the happy family group from which he was banished, and pictured with tolerable accuracy their employments. His neighbour, in ecstasies of mirth over the latest farce, remarked his inattention, and remarked to his friend that the Johnnie next him looked as if it was a funeral, and he thought the management ought to keep chaps out who couldn't look pleasant about it.

London being empty, Gerard found the next few days, while he was collecting his outfit, intolerably dull, and divided his spare time between an arm-chair in a strange club, his own being closed for repair, and a green chair in the dusty Park, where he sat and regarded the habits and customs of more seasoned Cockneys, with what he would have himself described as a lack-lustre eye.

But his boat started on Saturday, and he found his friends, and left his native shores with few anticipations of either pleasure or profit to be gained by his travels.

CHAPTER XXVI

"A BOLT FROM THE BLUE"

"Here are a few of the unpleasant'st words,
That ever blotted paper."

SHAKESPEARE.

ABOUT two months later, at Dorincourt, Lord Heversham received a bulky package from Gerard, marked "Private."

It was rather surprising, as the usual mail letter had also arrived, with the many varieties of stamps which Gerard always used, with a view to the rabbits' albums, and had been read aloud by Lady Heversham to the assembled family after breakfast.

There were only the children to hear it, for Alison and Audrey were in Paris, and Marjorie away on a visit.

So Lord Heversham took his parcel to the den, and opened it with some curiosity.

He turned over the pages, noting they were

closely covered with Gerard's rather straggly schoolboy handwriting.

"The old chap must be writing a book," he thought, as he sat down to peruse it at his leisure.

It was dated

Andrée's Stopping House.
Windermere, B.C. Oct. 18th, 19—

"My dear Father,

I want you to choose your most comfortable arm-chair, the leather one with the broken spring, in the den, will do, and light one of the Laranagas. I have a tale to unfold which will require a great deal of patience on your part, and will I fear give you a most remarkable shock. Don't read it till you are alone. I really hardly know how on earth to tell you.

I arrived at Calgary, in Alberta, with Lenthall, on the 10th, having dropped Mackenzie at Montreal, as we were told it was a convenient starting point for the mountains.

Lenthall picked up a pal there, at table d'hôte, who gave us a great deal of information.

He advised us to take pack-horses, and trail towards this place, or go by train to Banff, and

take the horses there. There is capital fishing — big, spotted trout — in the Kootenay river, and they are just beginning the spearing of salmon, which is good sport. The scenery in this part is very fine, so we settled to start from there, and not use the railway. It was about five days' journey, but I have told Mother all about it in her letter.

He told us of this stopping-place, and said the proprietor, a half-breed, was a decent chap, and would make us comfortable.

He remembered being here himself once, about eighteen years ago, after bear, in July, and that a curious thing had happened, which had fixed the date in his memory.

He and a friend, one Fraser, had arrived late one evening at this out of the way place, where probably no Englishmen had ever been, and had been told they must share a room, as another white man had the other. He had been brought in badly hurt by the fall of some rocks, and was apparently dying.

By the way, I haven't told you my informant's name. It was Jim Cuninghame. Do you remember it?"

Lord Heversham started, and rubbed his chin. Yes, he did remember the name.

"He's a good fellow, but a bit rough and colonial. He has got a ranch here, and hasn't been back to England for twenty years, not since this affair happened.

It turned out that the sick man was a stranger and an Englishman. An Indian who had guided him from Calgary had brought the news of the accident, and Andrée had sent out and brought him in. He was prospecting for minerals, and was alone except for the guide. He was quite unconscious when found, and had not spoken sensibly since, though he was delirious, and wandered a good deal.

Andrée had doctored him in a rough and ready fashion, and had set his right arm, which was broken, but he was evidently hurt internally as well, and though an Indian had been sent to Golden for the nearest doctor, it was a matter of eighty miles, and the man did not seem likely to live till he got back.

Cuninghame, a kindhearted chap, said he would sit up with him, as the innkeeper had had two nights up, and there were only Indian women there.

The poor fellow raved and shouted a good deal, and was inclined to be violent, but he quieted down towards morning, and slept a little.

Cuninghame said he was dozing himself, when he was waked by the sick man's speaking quite clearly and rationally.

He asked where he was, and how he got there, and then said he thought he must be dying.

Cuninghame said he was afraid he was, and asked if he could take any messages or anything for him.

He couldn't write with his broken arm, but he dictated to Cuninghame a message — of course you know all about it now — to the Countess of Heversham, a sort of confession, saying that he was dying, and expressing bitter remorse for some crime he had committed. He signed it with his left hand, 'Hugh Alured Dorincourt,' and gave the address. Then he was going on to say some more, but the exertion was too much for him, and he collapsed and died, before Cuninghame could get help."

"Curious," said Lord Heversham to himself. "Odd that Gerard should come across poor Uncle Hugh's tracks. Of course I remember the name of the man who wrote to my mother, James Cuninghame. How puzzled we were to know what crime poor Hugh had committed, to drive him away like that, till the old butler told us of the violent quarrel he and Uncle Hever-

sham had had. Poor fellow, he paid dearly for that hasty blow. But what can all the rest of this be about?"

And he lit a fresh cigar, and turned over the next leaf.

"Of course," Gerard continued, "all this is old history to you. But now comes the extraordinary part.

The innkeeper, Andrée, has lived here ever since. He remembered Cuninghame, and got talking over the business with him, and when he heard that I was of the same family, he said there was a curious circumstance that had happened a few months afterwards.

He had heard the dead man's name, and that he belonged to a 'titled family' in England. They had buried him all proper he said, and Mr. Cuninghame had written out the name for the gravestone, or rather for the slab of pinewood which they had put up, till the money came out from England for a proper one, which it did later, from the Countess of Heversham.

He said he'd show me the grave next day. Well, about six months after, he had occasion to go into Calgary on business, and went, as it happened, to the hotel where we had stayed. He knew the innkeeper there, and they got talking

together. The Calgary innkeeper, a white man, an American, told him that a man called *Denver* had left him in July, to go prospecting for gold in the Crow's Nest Pass via Fort Steel, and that his guide had come back alone, saying he had met with an accident, and been killed by a fall of rocks. The guide said he had got help from the nearest stopping-place near Lake Windermere, but as he couldn't afford to be out of a job, he had only waited to hear of his death, and had made tracks back to Calgary, where he could get another engagement.

So when the Calgary man got a letter from a Mrs. Denver, from Macleod, enquiring after her husband, he had told her all he knew, and had sent her back the belongings that her husband had left with him, his gripsack, which was labelled Hugh Denver, and his clothes.

He thought she might turn up, but she didn't, and he soon forgot the matter.

Andrée said, on comparing dates, it was sure to be the same man who had died at his place, but that he had given a different name there, and the two men naturally enough assumed that he had his reasons for so doing.

The Calgary man had of course lost all trace of Mrs. Denver, and there was no railway to

Macleod in those days; and said besides it was no business of his, which I suppose it wasn't.

Andrée said that he had kept the poor chap's things, but that he hadn't brought much more than he stood up in, and that there wasn't anything to show me after all these years. Besides, the letter home is proof enough that it was Uncle Hugh. He was probably going on to tell about his marriage, when he died.

I cross-questioned our friend till he was blue in the face, but he stuck to his story. Now, what do you make of it? The coincidence of names is curious, to say the least, and didn't Audrey say that her father had died somewhere in America, before she was born, and that her mother had brought her home?

You see what it means, if it is as I think.

I shall go straight back to Calgary, and interview the man there. I shall save a bit of time by going through the Kootenay valley to Banff, where I can get the C. P. R. to Calgary, but it will take three or four days, and a letter from there won't reach England for another ten. I shall get the name and address, if possible, of the Indian guide, who is really the connecting link, and get some particulars out of the Calgary man, as to where Mrs. Denver wrote to him from.

And when I have got everything possible, I will come home.

I can hardly contemplate the consequences of this discovery for you and dear Mother. As for me, I can work as well as most fellows, and it doesn't matter. But it will come very hard on you and the girls and all. But it does look queer.

I got the old chap, Andrée I mean, to dictate his statement and sign it, and Cuninghame and I witnessed it. So I enclose it for you to deal with.

Of course I'll come back as soon as I can. I can't leave you to struggle with this alone.

If it goes, as I fear it must, I must try and get a job abroad. No doubt matters can be arranged pretty well for you, but you know how it is with me. I must clear out.

Though it's a pretty ghastly affair for us all, I can't but smile when I think how knocked all of a heap the new Lady Heversham will be. To think of it. What a weird world we live in. That it should be *Audrey*, of all people. Talk of the irony of fate. Was there ever such a tangle? But I must of course get out of the way. The boot is on the other leg now, isn't it, Father?

Yours distractedly,

GERARD."

CHAPTER XXVII

CONSULTATION

"Do not consider what you may do, but what it will become you to have done, and let the sense of honour subdue your mind."

CLAUDIANUS.

LORD HEVERSHAM sat still for a long time after he had finished Gerard's letter.

His thin brown hand caressed his chin mechanically, and he looked straight out of the window at the fair prospect before him.

The sun was setting behind the western woods, tipping the branches, which were just beginning to turn, with a brighter gold. The green sward of the park stretching for many acres, unbroken by fence or hedge, was clothed here and there with tracts of yellowing bracken, above which could be seen the horns of the dappled deer crouching under the spreading oaks. The gleam of the lake could be seen between the thinning

foliage of the woods, shading in russet and crimson tints into the purple distance.

A goodly heritage indeed. And it was not his. It had never been his. Though every tree and stone on the place was dear to him, he must leave them. His thoughts were all for Gerard, and his wife. "Poor dear old boy," he thought, "what a blow for him. What a fine head of the family he would have made. He would never have been content to sink into obscurity and become a 'backwoodsman.' His position would only have been a stepping-stone, never a resting place. He would have used his intellect, his means, and his rank all for the State. He would have been a power for good."

The idea of contesting the claim never entered his mind any more than it had his son's. Right was right, and if his uncle Hugh had left a child born in wedlock, that child was the rightful owner, and he and his only interlopers.

"It is hard on the wife," he thought. "She will feel leaving her poor people, and all her home work. But after all we shall not be paupers. There is still Glentulloch, and we might get into Rossdean Manor. The lease must be nearly falling in. That doesn't go with the title. The children will feel it a come-down,

poor little souls. But it might be worse. Lucky we know the little lady, and that she is such a good sort. Poor child, as Gerard says, I believe the shock will be worse for her than anyone. I suppose the estate must be put in trust until she comes of age. I hardly expect she will insist on my making up for past disbursements, though I presume she could, legally.

"In that case we should be rather put to it. I must rub up my law, and consult old Henshaw as to our position. Upon my word, it is a bit of a shock, as Gerard says."

At this moment Pat put her head round the edge of the door and said, "Dad, Mother wants you to come and help her decide about the new rose garden. Mr. Saul is here, and she wants you to talk to him."

Lord Heversham pushed back his chair and stood up. "All right, Bunny, I'll come," he said. "I have something to put away first. Run and tell Mother not to decide on anything till she's seen me."

That evening Lord and Lady Heversham had a long and earnest conversation when the young people had been packed off to bed.

Lady Heversham took it quietly, as she took everything. Her first thought, as her husband's

had been, was for poor Gerard, but she was not so downhearted on his account as her husband, for she couldn't help hoping there was a way out, which to his ideas was hopelessly barred by circumstances.

"Shall we be very poor?" she asked.

"Oh, no," he replied. "As a matter of fact, in the way of spending we shall not feel much worse off. This place takes all the rents for wages and upkeep, and the mining royalties go in improvements, or are capitalised. There's a good bit of capital more than when I succeeded, and the new Lady Heversham won't find I've let the property down," he added, with a sad whimsical smile.

"That child!" said Lady Heversham. "How odd it all is. Of course that accounts for the family likeness and everything. By the way, I suppose her father's marrying under a false name won't affect her position."

"I fancy not," he said, "as long as the wife was not accessory to the fact. It only gives a little more trouble to the lawyers. But Gerard will find it all out, and bring back the proofs. I suppose she will have to bring a friendly suit, and, as we shall not contest it, of course it should be settled easily."

"Dick won't like it," said Lady Heversham. "But if he goes in for the army it will not really make much difference to him, and may make him work harder. It is only Gerard. The children will hardly take it in, and as for Marjorie I really believe she will prefer it. It will seem odd to become plain Mr. and Mrs. Dorincourt again, after all these years. It will be like our honeymoon over again, dear," and she stooped and kissed her husband just where his dark hair was beginning to whiten over the temples.

His answer was not in words, but it was quite satisfactory to her, and they sat for a space in silence, hand in hand, feeling how little worldly circumstances could matter, as long as they were together, and lovers still.

Presently, however, she rose, and releasing his hand with a caressing touch, went to the writing table, saying, "I feel I can't sleep till I have written to Gerard. I can just catch the mail tomorrow, if I send in early. My other letter has gone."

"Do," he said. "I have written, but tell him I think we will not tell her new ladyship until he gets back with all the papers. There might possibly be a slip yet, and it

would never do to disturb her mind, if it came to nothing. We must go on as usual, and I'll have a confidential talk with Henshaw."

"Quite so," she agreed. "Besides, she and Alison are so happy, and getting on so well with their French, by all accounts, we had much better leave them alone for the present. I wonder when Gerard will get back."

"In time for Christmas, I should think," said his father. "I imagine we may trespass on Lady Heversham's hospitality to that extent, eh! Mrs. Dorincourt?"

"And it will be nice to have one more Christmas all together here," she said, with a little pang. "I am not sure it will not be a great relief to have a smaller establishment, and less organisation to do. Rossdean is a nice little place. I always liked that sunny morning room. And if we can afford it we will build out that verandah we used to talk about."

"Oh, we can afford it all right," said her husband cheerily. "The difference between twenty thousand a year and five isn't so great as people think, when the property costs you fifteen thousand a year to keep up."

But for all his cheerful words his heart was sore for his home and hers for her children, though they kept each other's spirits up, and in so doing lessened their own regrets.

The old lawyer came down at once, and agreed that it was much better to leave the whole matter in abeyance for the present.

"Lord Windlesham, as I must still call him," he said, "has the best head for business I have ever met on so young a pair of shoulders. Of course, he knows the important things are to prove the marriage, and the identity of Hugh Dorincourt with Hugh Denver, and it isn't so long ago that it ought to be difficult. I daresay Miss Denver herself, or her maternal uncle, may have some old photos or letters which may help us.

"It is some satisfaction to know that it is not to go, if go it must, to some stranger, but to so charming and well brought up a young lady, and one moreover who has had the privilege of your intimate friendship for so long."

"Yes indeed," said Lady Heversham, "and you most not forget that we are under a heavy debt of gratitude to her as well, which I feel we can hardly ever repay."

"Oh, there's not much question of repayment," said the old lawyer with a smile. "I suppose, my lord, there could be no other method of repairing the breach — of keeping the younger branch of the family still in possession."

He spoke in an enquiring voice, looking at Lord Heversham with the privileged curiosity of the old family friend.

Lord Heversham rose and paced the room, his brows drawn together. "No," he said firmly. "Desirable as it might appear to be, it is impossible for us to consider the possibility of any such arrangement, now."

The lawyer pursed his lips. "A pity to be too quixotic, my lord," he said. "Where there is so much at stake, it might the judicious to pocket a few scruples."

"I am sorry," Lord Heversham answered rather shortly. "It is a subject that I prefer not to discuss, Henshaw. Shall we go into the question of the Rossdean lease?"

Mr. Henshaw looked at Lady Heversham, but she worked steadily at the silk tie she was knitting for Dick and would not meet his eye.

Nevertheless the old lawyer, a shrewd judge of men and women, knew that she was on his

side, and smiled to himself, feeling that his case was in good hands.

He untied a bundle of papers, and changed the subject as desired.

"Why not?" Gerard's mother was thinking to herself. "Why did Alured say 'now' in that marked way. I wonder if Gerard said anything before he went away. I am quite sure there was an attraction. Marjorie noticed it too. What an obvious solution it would be. Gerard would lose nothing but the title, and—after him —" and the mother's heart built a bright castle in the air for her eldest and best beloved child, as she listened to the droning voice of Mr. Henshaw reading aloud, and her husband's occasional questions or interpolations.

"What a pity he didn't tell her before," she thought. "Of course I see Alured's point. He couldn't ask her now. But if he had said anything, that could surely be got over, if she cared for him. And how could any girl help loving my Gerard?

"Ah, well, it is all in higher hands than ours. I won't fret over it. If it is for the best it will happen. Only I mustn't let Alured worry. I don't think he would have spoken in that positive way, if he didn't know something."

And Lady Heversham folded her knitting carefully, put it in her workbag, and remarking that it was time for tea, departed, leaving the two men to follow when they had concluded their business.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE"

"Confirmation strong, as proofs of Holy Writ."
SHAKESPEARE.

As Lord Heversham had expected, there was not much difficulty in finding the necessary proofs of Audrey's birth and parentage.

Gerard wrote in another fortnight that he had been able to trace and interview the guide, now settled down as the proprietor of a small drinking saloon in Calgary. He had even been able to produce a written agreement signed by Hugh Denver, promising to pay him certain sums in return for his assistance in that prospecting tour which had ended so tragically, and his narrative of the events concurred in every particular with that of the innkeeper. The man had succumbed to the temptations of his trade, and the time had to be selected for the interview, but when sober he was a reliable

witness, and the agreement was a sufficient proof of the identity of the two Hughs.

Then Gerard had found an even more valuable witness, in the widow of the settler to whose house, near Macleod, Hugh Denver had brought his bride, and where he had left her, barely three months after their marriage, to go on his last expedition.

She was a superior, well-educated woman, and drew up a very clear statement of the facts. The substance of it was, that Hugh Denver had been a friend of her husband's, whom he had known for about ten years. He was a grave, sad sort of man, about fifty, dark complexioned and thin. Not very unlike Gerard himself might be in twenty years time, she said. He lived alone among the Indians as a rule, but he sometimes came and visited the Johnsons. They had always suspected some sad secret in his life, but he had never spoken of it to them. It had been a great surprise to them, when one day he arrived bringing a wife with him. She was quite young, not more than two and twenty. She was a frightened, down-trodden looking young thing, fair and pale. She seemed shy and strange at first with her husband.

She used to help Mrs. Johnson with the work,

as of course they kept no servants. She became very intimate with her, and told her how she had come out from England in answer to an advertisement, as nursery governess, but that she had found herself quite deceived, and had been very unhappy. She said she had been treated just like a servant, and that the master drank and was often very violent, and his wife was nearly as bad. She couldn't get paid her salary and dared not leave, as she had no friends and no money. Then she had met Hugh Denver, who had pitied her and helped her. So when he asked her to marry him, she had thankfully accepted, though he was so much older, and she said that he had been a very good husband to her.

Then he had gone away, promising to return in six months. But he never came back, and the baby was born, about seven months after. He had left some money invested, and she was able to go on paying the Johnsons, and indeed Mrs. Johnson was thankful to have her company.

The baby was a sweet little thing, with dark eyes and hair. "Audrey" she called her; "Audrey Millicent."

Mrs. Johnson had stood godmother, and knew where Gerard could get all the registers, both of the marriage and baptism.

She had even got a letter from Mrs. Denver, written after her return to England, which took place when little Audrey was three months old. She said she was living with her married sister, and gave the name "Baxter" but some other address, not Brixton.

She had been very ill when the news of her husband's death had reached her, and Mrs. Johnson had hardly expected her to live out the journey, and had only had one letter from her.

"With all this evidence," Gerard continued, "there should be no difficulty in establishing the identity, and most probably Audrey will have more letters and things, which will put it beyond doubt."

Gerard added that he should catch the next possible boat, and hoped to be in England by the middle of December.

There was a great jubilation among the children at this last piece of information, and Lady Heversham had to undergo a good deal of cross-questioning as to why Gigs had changed his plans and come home in four months instead of twelve.

The children were wild to settle their usual Christmas festivities and give a ball, but she put them off with some difficulty, saying nothing could be settled till Gerard came home.

Meanwhile Audrey, all unconscious of the impending catastrophe, had experienced a small and unpleasant shock on her own account.

She received from her cousin Laura, by post, a copy of "Modern Society," with one paragraph heavily scored under in ink. It ran as follows:

"We hear on unimpeachable authority, that a matrimonial alliance is likely to take place between the eldest son and heir of one of our best known and respected peers and the fair daughter of a distinguished K.C. Rumour has it that the acquaintance commenced under romantic auspices, the young people having lost their way together on a Cumberland mountain. The gentleman's title and the lady's name both begin with W., which we may hope is a happy augury."

Audrey dropped the little pink paper, as if it were an adder. Surely such vulgar tittle-tattle need not disturb her. But it clung, and stung, and she wondered why everything seemed once more to have become flat, stale, and unprofitable.

Alison came in while she was reading the paragraph, and exclaimed, "Where did you get that little rag from, Audrey? Madame wouldn't be best pleased if she saw it, I know."

"It was sent me," said Audrey. "I don't like it either. I'll burn it when I get to the stove

in the salon. You look very cheerful. I hope your post was a more interesting one."

"Yes," said Alison. "I've had a capital bit of news. Gerard's coming home for Christmas."

"No," cried Audrey, incredulously. "I thought he would not be back till next August. Why, he'll miss all the shooting."

"I expect he got sick of it," said Alison. "Though it isn't like him to give things up. However, 'east and west, hame is best,' you know. There's something about festivities in Pat's letter, but she writes so badly I can't read it."

"Festivities," said Audrey, and her heart, which had given a bound at Alison's news, sank again. Surely this was confirmation of the paragraph.

But why had he waited till he went away, she wondered. Perhaps he had written to Dorothy Wyndham, and had only just had her answer. Of course that must be it. Well, she would be a lucky girl. And she was a dear herself, Audrey thought loyally. A dear gentle, sweet-natured girl. Gerard would be very happy. She wondered if she ought to talk about it to Alison, who had evidently not heard anything. But her habit of silence held her, and Alison chattered merrily on: how they

would have to have a proper ball, and that she and Audrey would both come out at it. What a jolly thing it was to have old Gigs turning up again. It would make all the difference to Christmas.

"I think I ought to stay with my uncle this Christmas," said Audrey. "He doesn't sound quite the thing, and I think I ought to go there."

"Oh, for goodness' sake don't begin to say you *ought* to," exclaimed Alison in dismay. "If you once get that bee in your bonnet, wild horses won't drag it out."

Audrey laughed in spite of herself. "You are a real old Mrs. Malaprop, Alison," she said. "But after all I am his niece, and I haven't seen him for ages."

"Only since August," commented Alison. "Now, don't put on that determined look. You know it would break all our hearts, and Gerard's too, and we simply must come out together. You know we must. Don't talk nonsense. It's time for déjeuner. Come on, or Madame will swear."

But Alison received unexpected support in her arguments in the shape of a letter from her mother, inviting Audrey to return to Dorincourt

with unusual formality. For they had all become so intimate that as a rule Audrey's presence there was as much taken for granted as that of their own girls.

Audrey, rather surprised, took it for a sort of courteous recognition of her grown-up status, and answered, accepting gratefully, but expressing a wish to go to stay with her uncle directly after Christmas.

This request Lady Heversham read with a smile and a sigh, as she handed over the letter to her husband.

"When do they come back?" he enquired.

"On the 20th December, Alison says," replied Lady Heversham, referring to her letter.

"Gerard gets back on the 21st," said her husband. "We'd best get it over at once, hadn't we?"

"Before Christmas?" queried Lady Heversham, rather wistfully.

"I think as soon as the boy gets home with the papers, and we can get old Henshaw down," said Lord Heversham. "I daresay she won't turn us out before Christmas, poor child."

"She ought to have somebody to represent her," said Lady Heversham. "Why not the uncle?"

"Good idea. We'll ask him down," was the reply.

"I suppose he isn't quite — quite ——?" said Lady Heversham, hesitating for an adjective.

"Oh, Adair says he's a decent old fellow enough. A bit rough and dishevelled looking, but quite possible. We needn't ask Master Alf down."

"I'm afraid he'll ask himself down, before long," she said ruefully.

"Never mind," he said comfortingly. "There's a certain amount of quiet dignity about our little supplanter, which will keep him in his place, if I'm not mistaken."

"Yes, I've noticed that," said Lady Heversham. "It is really rather remarkable what good manners Audrey always has had. I was struck with them, the first time she came down."

"Dear me, to think that snow storm should have turned us out of Dorincourt," mused her husband, playing idly with the trifles on his wife's treasure table.

"Well, it didn't quite do that," she said. "I suppose Gerard would have found out anyhow that poor Uncle Hugh had married and left a daughter, and you would have felt it your duty to hunt her up."

"Well, yes," he said, "if he had gone out there, and of course it would have been a lot more trouble and expense, and she would have been a stranger to us, without any of the ameliorating influences of our sweet society," he concluded, with a smile.

"And we should have lost Roger," she breathed, and there was a little silence.

"Why not ask the son down too?" said Lady Heversham, hospitably. "We shall only be ourselves, and we shall have to make his acquaintance now."

"My dear," he said, "you have no idea what you are undertaking. I believe Clarkson will give me notice. Not that that would matter," he said, checking himself. "How one forgets. But Adair told me he was the worst sort of cad, the facetious sort. Besides, he'll fall in love with Marjorie."

"Best thing for him," placidly replied his wife. "All young men are the better for falling in love properly. Besides, Marjorie will probably never discover it."

"Poor young man," said Lord Heversham. "There's nobody so cruel as a mother, to anybody but her own. How would you like any one to talk about Gerard as you talk about Alf?"

"Oh, Gerard," she said. "Why, of course that would be quite different," and catching the quizzical look in his eye, she laughed at herself.

So Mr. Baxter and his son, to their perfect stupefaction, found an aristocratic looking envelope, with a minute gold coronet on the flap, lying on the breakfast table, a day or two later.

"Who's your pal?" Master Alf enquired, between mouthfuls of bacon. "Who's corresponding with you, Dad, all over stars and garters?"

"Patricia Heversham," read Mr. Baxter slowly. "Patricia Heversham. She writes to ask us, you and me, to spend Christmas at — what's the word — Dorincourt Castle."

"Why, it's Audrey's swells," exclaimed Alf. "What on earth's made them so civil all of a sudden? Let's see the letter. A very good sort of letter. I couldn't have done it better myself. What's this about papers or photographs? What the spotted policeman are they up to? Audrey's parents! Have you any papers about Audrey's parents, Dad?"

"I believe I have some," said Mr. Baxter slowly. "In my safe. I had some correspondence with my poor sister-in-law before she came home.

I believe she wrote three or four times and her husband once. I am sure I kept them. I suppose we had better accept this invitation."

"Well, upon my word," said Mr. Alf, suddenly rather abashed. "I don't know that I'm specially keen. Dressing for dinner every night, you know, and minding one's p's and q's. Not but what it would astonish the club a bit. I shall be able to give 'em a few tips as to how our haristocracy live. Well, I don't mind doing a jolly for once. I'm game. But you'll have to fork out a fiver or two. I shall want a new dress-suit, the hired ones run up a bit, and some more shirts. One can't enjoy these privileges without paying for them," and Mr. Alf perused the letter again, without noticing his coffee was getting cold, so elevated was his spirit.

The days passed on, and Audrey and Alison returned home to Dorincourt.

The big motor met them at the station, and when they drew up at the hall door, to their surprise, Lord Heversham himself came down the steps, bareheaded, to greet them.

"I say, I feel awfully grown-up," said Alison. "Look at father. He's treating us just like visitors. Oh, isn't it good, good, good to be at home again."

Audrey thought there was something unusual in Lord Heversham's manner, as he took her hand in his, and looked into her eyes with the dark, keen glance, that reminded her of Gerard, and made her droop her eyelashes and blush, she knew not why.

And there was Lady Heversham in the hall, looking as regal as ever, but rather white, and surely there were tears in her eyes.

Alison, cheerfully and affectionately greeting and being greeted, noticed nothing, but Audrey, as she followed her hostess into the splendid drawing-room, with its blazing fires and masses of hothouse plants, felt there was a difference, which made her vaguely uneasy.

She felt it even more when, turning towards her own little room, she was deferentially informed by the maid that the tapestry chamber was ordered to be made ready for her.

"The tapestry chamber?" she exclaimed with surprise. "Why?"

The maid didn't know. She was only obeying orders.

The tapestry chamber was a beautiful room, with the walls hung with the delicately tinted hangings that gave it its name.

No gloomy mediaeval designs, metaphorical

mythological scenes, or sanguinary representations of sport were there, but garlands of pink and crimson roses on a cream-coloured ground, with shy fawns and brilliant birds appearing among them.

The room had been prepared for an ancestress, on her arrival as a bride, and had always been kept for visitors of distinction. Audrey found her own bookcase and writing table, with her special pictures and photos, arranged in the spacious bow window, almost a room in itself, which overlooked the front entrance, and her other belongings arranged in the exquisite chestnut-wood wardrobes, that were carved with the family arms.

The bed was in the same wood, with its carved canopy supported by flying Cupids, and draped with embroidered silk curtains.

Queen Victoria had stayed at Dorincourt when a girl, and was reported to have said it was the most comfortable bed she had ever slept in. So Audrey wondered more and more at the honours that had been thrust upon her, as she dressed for dinner.

CHAPTER XXIX

AN UNWILLING INHERITOR

"Come quench your blushes, and present yourself
that which you are, the mistress of the feast."

SHAKESPEARE.

THAT night at dinner, Audrey was told by Lord Heversham that her uncle and cousin were coming down the next day.

Her feelings were decidedly mixed, for while she recognised the kindness of the thought, she knew how very uncongenial the society of Alf would be to them all, and believed her friends were making a sacrifice from the mistaken notion of giving her pleasure.

She stammered a little in her reply, and Lord Heversham appreciated the reason. He added, slowly and kindly,

"I want to ask you also, if you have any letters or papers belonging to your father or mother here."

Audrey started, the colour rushed into her cheeks. What did he mean? She remained speechless, struggling to find her voice.

Lord Heversham looked a little surprised, and said, "Mr. Henshaw is coming down on estate business, and Gerard will be back early tomorrow, so we are to have a little consultation together about you."

"About me?" she said, her breath coming short. Then an idea came to her. Perhaps now she was grown up, Lord Heversham was going to do something kind and generous about an allowance, or some provision for her. Her pride rose at the idea, and for an instant she felt affronted, but the next moment a rush of affection overcame the little feeling, and she was able to reply with composure. The second thought was, on the whole, a reassuring one, for she had almost suspected something that was, of course, quite impossible.

The next morning she woke in the carved chestnut bed, wondering where she was.

Then came the pleasant thought. Gerard was coming home. She should see him that day. Then like a douche of cold water came the question, Why was he coming home? Was it on account of his approaching marriage that this

family meeting had been convened on her account? That was sure to be it. But how quiet they all were about it. Not a hint or a whisper of what would be such an important family event. Either it wasn't settled yet, or else they wished no rumour to get out until his return. No doubt the Wyndhams would be coming to stay, and it would be announced in proper form.

Poor Audrey, it was with a heavy heart she finished dressing. About twelve o'clock the motor was despatched to the station full of children, who would not be denied, to meet Gerard, who had slept the night before at Mr. Henshaw's house in town, and was bringing the old lawyer back with him.

When it returned, Marjorie, Alison, and Dick, who had been eagerly listening for the horn, ran down the wide front steps and precipitated themselves upon the traveller.

Audrey, sitting at the writing table in her window above, saw the happy meeting. She noticed that Gerard looked older, graver, and she fancied thinner. But the familiar dry, melancholy smile lit his eyes at some remark of Roger's, to her inaudible, and he turned at once to Marjorie with a question.

Her reply was a bright nod, and a glance up at Audrey's window. She was gratified that he had evidently asked for her so soon.

Then the whole party disappeared into the hall, and the rabbits came clamouring at Audrey's door, demanding what she was doing, and why she didn't come down at once to see Gigs.

It had to be faced, so Audrey, with inward tremor, but outward decorum, followed the little girls downstairs into the great hall, where the whole party was assembled.

Lady Heversham first introduced Mr. Henshaw, who looked attentively at Audrey, as he shook hands with her, and then she turned to Gerard.

He stood erect, watching her, the lines of his handsome lips firmly set, and his grave, dark eyes almost stern.

But at her shy upward glance, a wave of tenderness mingled with a half humourous sadness, passed over his face, and he took her cold hand into his strong clasp, bowing his dark head over it with no spoken word.

His father watched him keenly, but Lady Heversham had her eyes on Audrey's face, and what she saw there satisfied her.

But there was scant time allowed to them for greeting. The children, wild with joy, were

full of chatter, questioning, giving information, demanding news, all in a breath, and they were summoned to lunch before Gerard had been able to escape from them.

The second arrival that day was a less tumultuous affair.

Audrey, Alison, and Marjorie were with Lady Heversham in the small drawing-room when the motor arrived, and Mr. Baxter and Mr. Alfred Baxter were announced.

Audrey came forward behind Lady Heversham, and kissed her uncle with sincere affection, extending a cousinly hand to Alf, with inward hopes that he would not abuse the privilege.

But Alf was a good deal subdued and frightened. His little cockney soul had never imagined anything like the stately splendour of Dorincourt, the spacious rooms, the subdued voices, the perfectly trained service, and he felt his own insignificance, and longed, as he said afterwards, to make a bolt for it. His entrance was slightly complicated also by an unfortunate slip on the polished floor, causing him to enter practically upon the back of the grand Mr. Clarkson, whose dignity saved the occasion, though poor Alf lost thereby the last shred of his self-respect.

Audrey introduced him to Lady Marjorie and Lady Alison, and adroitly got him into a deep chair, where he subsided, breathing hard, and crimson in the countenance.

Lady Heversham, meanwhile, was talking to Mr. Baxter, who was much less embarrassed than his son, partly through his habitual preoccupation, and partly his short-sightedness, and who found her placid presence soothing.

Tea came in, and with it Lord Heversham, Gerard, and Mr. Henshaw, and fresh introductions had to be made.

Alf didn't know whether he ought to sit still or stand up, and his usual assurance at what he called "muffin worries" had deserted him. He jumped up once to pass a cup to Marjorie, from whom he could hardly take his eyes, but caught his coat sleeve in a corner of the screen, and nearly poured it over her, to his deep confusion and despair.

She, however, neatly dodged the cascade, and to his surprise nobody laughed or even noticed the mishap.

"Lor', how they'd have roared at me at home," he thought, "and what a fool I should have looked."

But after that he sat still, accepting in-

discriminately every dish that was offered him, and devouring tomato sandwiches, ginger nuts, anchovy biscuits, and cream cakes, in rapid succession.

After tea, Lord Heversham, Mr. Henshaw, and Mr. Baxter disappeared together, and Gerard said to Alf, "Do you care about billiards? Come and have a knock up with me."

"We'll come too," said Alison, "and play a four. How good are you, Mr. Baxter?"

Fortunately Alf was rather what he would have called a "dab" at billiards, and accepted the invitation with alacrity.

So he and Alison played against Gerard and Audrey, beating them with disgraceful ease, while Marjorie marked for them.

"What's the matter, Gerard?" she said. I never saw you so off your play."

"I've been travelling on and off for a fortnight, my lady," said Gerard, missing an easy cannon, as he spoke. "But you can't do better than watch Mr. Baxter. I also feel quite sure that he can do conjuring tricks, and I propose that we stop playing to have an exhibition."

"Indeed, my lord," said Alf, much gratified, "I only do a few little things, just to amuse kids, I mean children. Wouldn't you rather

have another game? Me and my partner will give you fifty up."

"Oh, no," said Audrey. "Let me fetch the rabbits and Roger. I am sure Gerard is tired."

"Sure you don't want to go on playing?" enquired Gerard of her in an undertone. "If not, let's get an audience together for the magician, and then slip out. My father wants to see you in the library."

Audrey went first red, and then pale, but went off in search of the children. Pat, Honor, and Roger soon assembled, and with Dick installed as a slightly sardonic conjurer's assistant, with sundry glasses of water, old hats, and other paraphernalia collected, the absence of Gerard and Audrey was not conspicuous.

Audrey's heart beat rather uncomfortably, as she glanced up in Gerard's serious face, but he gave her one of his old grave smiles as he opened the library door, and stood back to let her enter.

Lord Heversham was sitting in his writing chair, and Mr. Henshaw was leaning over him putting some papers in order.

A green-shaded reading lamp illuminated the table, leaving the rest of the room in darkness.

As the young people entered, Lady Heversham came in by another door, and sat down

in one of the big leather armchairs by the fire. Gerard went and leant over her, and she motioned Audrey to sit in the corresponding chair the other side of the hearth.

"This is all very solemn," said Gerard. "You are fairly frightening Audrey. Let us hasten to explain that it is not she who is the criminal."

"I hope nobody is the criminal," said Mr. Henshaw rather severely, and Gerard looked penitent.

"Miss Denver," said Lord Heversham, "have you a second baptismal name?"

"Yes," said Audrey nervously.

"It's not a legal offence," said Gerard, in an encouraging aside.

"What is it?" said Lord Heversham.

"Audrey Millicent," was the answer, and a little sigh went round the room.

Lord Heversham turned to a dark corner, where Audrey discerned the figure of her uncle in another chair.

"Mr. Baxter," he said, "I think we may consider the proofs are complete. Patricia, you must tell her.

Lady Heversham opened her arms. Audrey knelt down beside her, and with her head on the kind motherly knee, listened breathlessly.

"My dear," she began. "I hardly know how to put it. We have made a very surprising discovery. It might have been a much more painful one, but you must be prepared for a shock. Have you any idea who your father really was?"

Audrey sprang to her feet, her eyes bright, her cheeks scarlet.

"Oh, not that, not that!" she cried. "Oh, Lady Heversham, don't tell me you've found it out! Oh, what shall I do? What shall I do?" and falling on her knees again she buried her face in Lady Heversham's lap.

The men had all risen by this time, and were standing round, almost too astonished to speak.

Lady Heversham caressed the soft brown hair, till Audrey lifted a tear-stained face, and said more collectedly: "What is it that you have found out? I never, never, meant to tell, and turn you all out."

"My dear child," began Lord Heversham, huskily, but his voice broke, and Mr. Henshaw took up the word.

"Tell us rather, Miss Denver," he said; "how much do you know, and how did you find it out?"

"It was the signet ring," said Audrey breathlessly; "I saw it was the same as the flag. And the tablet in church had the same date, and my father's name was Hugh. But indeed, indeed, I hoped it wasn't true. Need we tell anybody? I was so happy to know you were my own dear people, and I didn't want anything more. Oh, Lady Heversham," and she clasped her hands imploringly, "*must* we tell? If I don't want it, can I be made to take it?"

The old lawyer wiped his glasses, and cleared his throat.

"Your conduct, my dear young lady," he said, "has been beyond praise. I have no words to describe my admiration. But the law of the land must be obeyed, and I feel sure that our kind friends, in resigning a position that is not legally theirs, can feel nothing but satisfaction at giving it into the hands of one so high principled and warm hearted, as the real Countess of Heversham in her own right has shown herself to be."

CHAPTER XXX

A GREAT CHANGE

"When we were happy, we had other names."
SHAKESPEARE.

THE conclave had broken up. Mr. Baxter had gravely congratulated his niece, and had shaken hands silently with Lord Heversham, henceforth, through his mother having married a distant cousin, to be known as Mr. Dorincourt.

Audrey had, after a fit of half hysterical sobbing and clinging to her cousin, been induced to resume her chair, and listen to the proofs of her succession, as collected by the old lawyer.

He had the letters all arranged, the certificates in order, and the corresponding papers, which had been in the possession of the Dorincourt family, all put in their places.

The signet ring would be another confirmatory piece of evidence, though without the documents it would be no proof.

"It will take a long time to get your succession proved, and your claim allowed by the Courts," he said, "and in the meanwhile I would suggest that the present arrangements should continue."

Audrey's face brightened. A gleam of hope appeared.

"I think it highly probable, Lady Heversham," he said with a bow to Audrey, "that under the circumstances your cousin may be appointed your guardian, until you have attained your majority, and be allowed a sufficient income to maintain the property, and make a home for you. Unless, of course, you have other views."

"Mr. Henshaw," said Audrey suddenly, with a little unconscious air of dignity, that sat well upon her, "will you please understand that, as far as my wishes can be considered, I should wish everything to go on exactly the same, if — my cousin —" blushing a little — "will be so very good as to undertake the charge. I could not bear to be the means of breaking up this dear home, and the property could not possibly be in better hands. Dear, dear Lady Heversham," — "Cousin Patricia," interpolated the lady — "well, Cousin Patricia, speak for me. I am so young,

I feel so ignorant, and oh dear, I *am* so miserable."

Nobody could help smiling, and Mr. Henshaw began to tie up his papers, remarking that he had no doubt whatever that all could be arranged on the most satisfactory basis, where all parties to the agreement were so well disposed towards each other.

He and Mr. Baxter then left the room, leaving the family party together.

"So you knew it all the time," said Gerard at last, breaking the silence.

"I only guessed it," said Audrey tearfully. "It was that horrid ring."

"Rather amusing state of things, I call it," said Gerard.

"Amusing!" said Audrey in tragic tones.

"Yes, for those who like practical jokes," he remarked.

"Gerard," said his mother, "how can you?"

"I'm only explaining things, darling," he said. "These aristocratic ladies don't always take the trouble to cultivate their sense of humour. She persists in regarding as a tragedy the very broadest piece of farce I have ever come across.

"Here we are full of anxiety as to the effect the

shock will have on her ladyship. Here is she keeping the same information carefully from us, for the same reason. Oh, the thing is really remarkably funny if you look at it in the right way. As far as I can see, we have all gained by the transaction."

"How all of us?" enquired Audrey, beginning to respond to his mood.

"Why, we have all gained a new cousin, or are you my aunt?" he said with a smile. "I am not quite sure you are not. And you have got a whole family, ready made, a perfect fit, without the trouble of forming their characters."

"I believe I knew I was your cousin before I guessed it," said Audrey, beginning to recover her spirits.

"The only person who has shown the smallest spark of intelligence in the matter," said Gerard, "was that old Miss Burgess. You know, the old party with the purple front, and the wall eye, who said at the ball that you were a cousin or something. I heard her, and thought what an old ass she was, and lo! it was I."

"A very salutary discovery," said his father. "Well, it's time to dress for dinner, after all these alarms and excursions. Come along, Mrs. Dorincourt. After you, my Lady Heversham."

"Oh, don't," pleaded Audrey. But the depression was lifting. After all, it seemed only the title that had changed hands. Mr. Henshaw's hint about the guardianship had lifted a load from her heart, and possibly from that of her cousin as well.

It would be something, not to have to hand the care of the broad acres and the tenantry, all familiar friends, to strangers. Even as a steward, Alured Dorincourt felt that he might still have an object in life, and he knew that he could be of use in the world.

So, after all, it was actually a merry dinner, and Gerard drew out Alf with so much success that even the decorous servants were fain to leave the room unexpectedly at inopportune moments, in spite of the glare in the butler's eye, who, being devoid of humour himself, saw no necessity for its existence in others, and was not a little shocked at his lordship's making so free with that little counter-jumper.

Audrey had begged that the news might not be given out till after Christmas, and that all might go on as usual.

So nothing was said to mar the evening, and Gerard himself seemed the gayest of the gay,

though his father knew, and his mother suspected, how heavy was his heart.

"Where are the rabbits?" he enquired suddenly. "Has Mr. Baxter turned them into goldfish, or red silk handkerchiefs? I forgot it was never safe to leave rabbits with a conjurer."

"There are great preparations forward," said Marjorie smiling. "They are to act a duologue, and it is all to be a surprise for us."

"Another surprise," said Gerard aside to Audrey. "I don't think my nerves will stand much more. Let us ask Mr. Baxter to do a little step dancing instead."

"That would be a surprise," said Audrey merrily. "By the way, how *did* you know he did conjuring tricks?"

"You're not the only person who can make guesses," said Gerard. "I thought from the shape of his tie that he would, and I was right. I was very much obliged to him, I can tell you. But the best trick of all was done in the library, wasn't it?"

"Trick," said Audrey, reproachfully.

"Well, wasn't it a trick? Miss Denver is transformed into the Countess of Heversham, and Lord and Lady Heversham become plain Mr. and Mrs. Dorincourt, not to speak of nearly

every one else in the house changing their names in the twinkling of an eye. And how was this done? By the production of a few pieces of paper, scribbled over with pen and ink. If that wouldn't have been called black magic in the Middle Ages, I'll eat my hat."

"It all seems like a particularly unpleasant dream to me still," said Audrey, "and I wish someone would wake me up."

"Let's ask Mr. Alf, your other cousin. By the way, I suppose he is my cousin too," said Gerard, "through you, who may be entitled the missing link."

"No longer missing," said Audrey. "Worse luck. The only comfort is that nobody else knows yet. How all the poor people will hate me, and the tenants, and the servants. Oh dear, oh dear," and Audrey's eyes filled again with tears.

Gerard looked away, and the footman wondered after how his lordship's napkin ring got so crushed; but he said cheerfully, "It's wonderful what people will get fond of, you know. I heard of a man who became attached to a particularly revolting toad, because it was the only toad in his garden. So you needn't give up hope entirely. I daresay you will find that old Mrs. Tubbs will

graciously accept a flannel petticoat, or a pound of tea, from you, and I am sure the tenants' children won't refuse your invitation to the Christmas Tree."

"You *know* it isn't that," said Audrey, the tears in her voice, if not her eyes.

"Yes, I know," said Gerard gravely. "I know. But it must be gone through with now, and I am sure the head of the family will set us all a good example."

Audrey looked up, met the chivalrous admiration in his eyes, and quickly looked down again. But he had struck the right note, and she registered an inward vow to try never to fall short of the standard he had held before her.

Dinner over, they repaired to the white drawing-room, where Pat and Honor, disguised in white cotton sunbonnets, and large aprons, recited the time-honoured duologue of "Geese," after which they all turned to Dumb Crambo, which the actors enjoyed so much that they hardly noticed the preoccupation of some of their audience.

That evening, when Mr. Dorincourt and his son were smoking their final cigars in the billiard room, Gerard said:

"Father, I may as well tell you now as later.

I hope you won't think I am afraid of facing the music, but I can't stop here."

"No," said his father, "I thought not. I suppose you will finish your terms at Oxford first, and then go to read for the F.O. exam."

"I mean more than that," said Gerard. "I'm grieved to hurt you, but I must give up the F.O. idea. I'm going out of England."

"Out of England!" his father echoed. "Where to?"

"I met a good fellow on the boat coming home, an American financier, a sound chap, but not much of a scholar," said Gerard. "We rather hit it off, and he offered me a post as secretary to help him address his letters, and entertain the bosses," he said. "He offers a capital salary, and wants me at once. I told him I'd come."

There was a long pause. Gerard stood by the fire, one hand on the high mantel shelf, the other jingling some loose coins in his pocket, his head bent, regarding the leaping flames in the wide old-fashioned grate, his back to his father.

For fully five minutes neither of them spoke.

Then Mr. Dorincourt said huskily, "Is this necessary, my son?"

And Gerard replied: "It is necessary."

CHAPTER XXXI

FATE

"Yet who shall shut out Fate?"

EDWIN ARNOLD.

CHRISTMAS was over, and the household was regaining its normal condition.

The stupefying announcement had been made by Alured Dorincourt himself at the big tenants' dinner on Boxing Day.

The family had of course been told privately beforehand, and had on the whole taken the news quietly. In fact Marjorie, who had been rather silent of late, and had lost some of her pretty colour, seemed unaccountably to recover her spirits, and was heard singing about the house in her old way.

The rabbits were still the rabbits, and the fact that the servants had been instructed to address them as Miss, and never remembered to do so, did not seem to trouble them.

Alison and Dick were mainly concerned at the decision that the big annual ball would not take place, and consoled themselves getting up skating parties and tobogganing, there being a spell of real winter weather, without apparently giving much thought to their vanished glories.

When they had ascertained that they were still to live at Dorincourt, and that Audrey was to become a permanent inmate, instead of an occasional visitor, they seemed no more concerned than little Roger.

But the young Lady Heversham was by no means capable of the cheerful philosophy of her cousins. Even though her worst fears had not been realised, and the family turned out "to sing in the streets," as Dick once suggested after a singularly successful performance of "In 'er 'air she wore a white camelliar," all was not well with her.

Her pillow was suspiciously damp every morning, as the housemaids remarked to each other, and there were dark circles under her eyes, which told of sleepless nights. She seemed to have forgotten the merry familiar chaff she used to enjoy, and would sit gazing out of the window at her undesired heritage, with a book unheeded on her lap, refusing to join the others, and getting

so thin and pale that her kind relatives became seriously anxious.

Gerard had sailed for America, and the sun had lost its light, and life its object. She knew now why. She could not disguise from herself, though she confided in nobody the secret of her unhappiness. She had of course realised that the newspaper report was unfounded, but it had served its purpose of opening her eyes to her own feelings.

Although her cousin Patricia divined the cause, the strict code of honour that guided her husband and son prevented her from taking the forlorn little Countess into her kind arms, and letting her sob out her grief upon her shoulder.

"It's a bad time," said Mr. Dorincourt, who was himself looking worried and sad. "A bad time for us all, but principally for poor Audrey. She must work out her own salvation, poor child. We can't help her. Happily at eighteen the heart is elastic. She will forget."

"And poor Gerard," said his mother, to whom by now his secret was known. "Will he forget? Aren't you too hard on them, Alured? It breaks my heart to see poor Audrey's big, wistful eyes. When one knows it only means a word to put it right. And my darling boy, eating his heart

out away off there among strangers. Surely, surely, happiness comes first."

But her husband shook his head. "No," he said, "there is something that comes before happiness. I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not honour more," and his wife could only sigh and acquiesce.

The weather changed, to the discomfiture of the skaters. Thick white fogs blotted out the landscape, and hung like a pall over the earth. For several days the world was wrapped in misty vapour. There were rumours of disasters to shipping and trains, of business delayed and hampered in big towns, and of general dislocation of traffic.

Audrey, one afternoon, a week after the "Columbia" had sailed, had an errand down to the village, and, glad to escape from her sad thoughts, dressed herself warmly, and started off basket in hand through the woods, which was a shorter way than down the drive. As she entered the plantation, Roger came running after her. "Audrey, Audrey, let me come with you," he cried breathlessly. "The blacksmith's finished the new toboggan and I want to see it."

"Won't the fog make you cough?" asked Audrey.

"Oh, no," he said. "Mother gave me leave. Besides, I do believe it's clearing; I saw a shadow."

"Where?" said Audrey, looking round. Then her heart seemed to stop beating, as Gerard stepped quietly from among the trees, and took possession of her basket.

"Where are you going this delightful afternoon?" he enquired. "I am glad you have an escort."

"Gigs!" shouted Roger in an ecstasy. "How, why, what, I thought you were in New York by now. Does mother know?"

"Nobody knows yet, my son," said Gerard, putting a restraining hand upon him, to prevent him rushing home with the news.

"Never be in a hurry to carry evil tidings. They come soon enough," he said. "At present I feel an overpowering desire to walk down to the village, and I don't propose to return home till I have gratified it. They won't expect me yet, for I wired I was coming by the 6.10. But I changed my mind, as you see."

"But there has been no telegram," said Audrey.

"Really?" said Gerard, looking rather concerned. "I telegraphed the moment we reached Liverpool. But I will explain."

"Yes, please do," said Audrey. "I do hope nothing dreadful has happened. You look pale, and unlike yourself."

"And whatever have you got on?" said Roger. Indeed Gerard did not present his usual neat and well turned out appearance. His dark blue serge suit, originally so well cut, was stained and shrunk, and hung badly on his slight, tall figure. He wore a strange cap, rather too large for him, of a rough tweed, and big clumsy looking boots. His left hand was bandaged, and he looked tired and harassed.

"Let us sit down," said he, "on this fallen tree. Lend me your cloak," and with one hand he arranged Audrey's golf cape to make a seat for her, sitting down beside it himself, rather wearily.

Audrey clasped her hands in suspense, anxiously searching his face.

His eyes lit up for a moment with the tender, whimsical smile she knew so well, but changed and saddened again as he said, "There was a collision at sea. We were about three days out, and were run into in the fog by a homeward bound liner. We were wrong, on the 'Columbia,' out of our course. It was late, about twelve. Everybody was below, but I was smoking on

deck, with one of the officers, a nice fellow. We had gone up to the top deck, to try and see something in the fog."

He paused, and Roger said impatiently, "Go on; whatever happened?"

"I hardly know," Gerard replied. "We were going dead slow, the foghorn sounding continuously. I was looking out to sea, when a great black cloud seemed to rise out of the fog. I heard my friend say something in a very agitated voice. Then came an irresistible impact. We seemed to be forced violently back, so violently, that I was thrown clean over the rail that I was leaning on. I clutched at something, which came with me. And then I was in a kind of welter of roaring suffocation and blackness. It was icy cold. I must have gone down deep, from the height I was thrown from."

He drew a long breath, and resumed in a more cheerful tone. "Then, as the novels say, I knew no more. But presently I woke up, and found myself in another cabin, in a bunk rather too short for me. A taste of brandy was in my mouth, and a strange Johnnie was giving me some more. I have always disliked compulsory feeding, and tried to say so. Well, to cut my story short, I had been picked up by a returning

steamer, not a big boat, floating with the help of my faithful deck chair, which had accompanied my dive overboard. I soon got all right. But we were desperately anxious about the two big ships. I had drifted ever so far, and it was a miracle that they had seen me in the fog and all."

"A miracle indeed," said Audrey in a whisper.

"I had to come home again, with the boat of course, and I had lost everything except what I had on, and even then I was hardly respectable, as you see. But when we reached Liverpool, we heard that the 'Columbia' had just arrived at New York, so we presume the other ship was all right too. It was a bit of a nightmare coming home, I can tell you, wondering what had happened to them. I was glad that the Marconi apparatus had not been fitted on to the 'Columbia,' or they would have sent the news home that they had mislaid me, and caused some inconvenience."

"Oh, Gerard," was all Audrey could say.

He glanced at her wet eyes, and looked hastily away.

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Then a little breeze began to stir in the leafless branches, a gleam of sunset light showed between

the tall tree trunks, and a robin raised a sweet little twittering song.

"I say, how jolly," said Roger. "But it served you wight for going away at all."

"Oh, you think so, do you, most wise young judge?" said Gerard. "And may I ask why?"

It was an injudicious question, and received a startling answer.

"Because you said you wanted to stay at home, and mawwy Audrey."

Audrey started and felt giddy for a moment. As in a dream she heard Gerard's voice, with its half sad, half mocking intonation, reply,

"Ah, but Audrey mustn't marry a poor beggar like me."

"She wants to," said Roger sturdily. "Emma told me so. She said, 'It do seem stoopid for his lordship to cut away like that, and Miss Audrey crying her eyes out for him every night.'"

Audrey came to herself abruptly. "Roger," she exclaimed, "what are you talking about?"

"About you and Gigs," said Roger unabashed. "There, I don't care, I don't. I told Pat I'd tell, and she dared me to. I don't know why he says you don't want to marry him, but I heard him tell dad he wanted to marry you

awf'lly, in the smoking room at Glentulloch last holidays."

Audrey turned a face to Gerard so transfigured with joy, that he instinctively slipped down on one knee beside her in the wet grass, as she said softly,

"Gerard, is this true?"

And holding her in his arms, he replied, "Well, as Roger has taken upon himself the office of intermediary, I must admit that his facts are correct. But as the need for his services is now over, he may run back and tell the family that the fog has lifted at last, and that we are coming — home.

"Is that the message you would like taken, my Audrey, my darling?"

And Audrey, with her happy face hidden in the shabby blue coat, had no objections to offer.

CHAPTER XXXII

"WEDDING BELLS"

"Ah, marriage is the life-long miracle,
The self-begetting wonder, daily fresh."

C. KINGSLEY.

OF all the inmates of Dorincourt Castle, the one person to whom the late events had afforded pure and unadulterated satisfaction was Mr. Alfred Baxter.

He even wrote a long letter to his sister Laura, with whom he was usually more on terms of armed neutrality than those of devoted affection.

"You *will* sit up," he wrote, "when I tell you what's been happening here.

"It turns out that Audrey's father's name was Dorincourt, not Denver, and that he was the uncle of this lord here; a good chap with no side.

"I never knew before that girls could be countesses all by themselves, but it seems so,

and so Audrey is really the Countess of Heversham, and all these Dorincourts no better than plain Misters and Missises like us.

"There, put that in your pipe and smoke it.

"Audrey'll have all this ripping great place, and two or three others as far as I can make out, and about twenty thou' a year, besides the title. But it is to be settled that the family don't kick out, but her cousin (it seems all rot calling him Dorincourt) is to stop on as her guardian and in charge of the property. At least that's what they want, if the lawyers will let 'em.

"Good for you, you can talk about your cousin the Countess, and knock the spots off them a bit. I shall get some shooting and the run of my teeth, anyhow, which suits yours truly all right.

"But the funny part about it all is that Audrey goes moping about like a sick cat, and looks as if she was going to be hanged.

"The others all seem quite jolly about it, and the kids don't care a tuppenny.

"The eldest son, Windlesham — by the way, I must drop that name too — Gerard Dorincourt — was, I think, pretty sick about it. He got some post in America, and went off there, just after the announcement, though they said he had collected most of the evidence himself, and had

behaved jolly well about it. However, his boat got into a fog and got run into by another liner out of her course, and Gerard got chucked overboard somehow. The two ships lost each other in the fog, and a returning boat picked him up, after a couple of hours in the water, floating on a sort of deck chair, but knocked silly with a bang on the head and a broken wrist.

"He got home tonight, looking a bit less of a dandy than usual, and met Audrey and Roger in the wood. He had wired, but the wire hadn't come, because of the fog, I suppose.

"So we're all right again now. His people think a lot of him, and though I must admit I thought him a bit high and mighty at first, one can't help being sorry for the poor chap now.

"Another thing I must tell you, is that one of the girls, Marjorie, is a real charmer. Knocked the stuffing out of Alf Baxter, Esquire, in the first ten minutes. When she was Lady Marjorie I suppose she wouldn't have looked at me, but now she's come down to plain Miss, it's wonderful how affable she's got. She's uncommonly pretty too, I can tell you; and though I do think that Mr. Alfred and Lady Marjorie Baxter would have sounded better, yet she's a real high stepper, with the sort of skin that wants no paint, and

I've a jolly good mind to try my luck. She *has* got a smile on her. It gives you the jimjams, and no mistake.

"Another young chap has turned up here tonight. A Captain Adair. I thought Lady — no, Miss Marjorie looked down her nose a bit at him, and she asked me in the most marked way to come and have a game of billiards with her after tea. I was all over it, as you may guess, especially as the other fellow was evidently dead nuts on her.

"There's a good sort of fellow here, called Clarkson, son of the groom of the chambers. No end of a swell, keeps his own trap, and he and I have palled up a bit. He tells me Marjorie has had lots of chances, refused a Marquis last year, the son of a duke, and has had three or four offers every season, ever since she came out.

"Spec they'll fall off a bit now. Pity she didn't rope in the Marquis when she had the chance. But all the better for me. I'm not such a bad-looking chap, am I? and she says I'm the best billiard player she's ever seen. That's a bit of all right, isn't it?

. . . . . .

"I had to stop writing for dinner. Audrey looks better tonight; Gerard was quite funny in

his way, not my way, but he makes one laugh somehow. It isn't what he says, you know, but the way he says it.

"That Adair chap's a bit of a frost. He's a deal too cocksure and cool, and hardly throws a word at yours truly. He needn't be more haughty than the rest of them, though they're not lords and ladies any longer. They always treated me properly, I will say that for them, even down to the little chap, Roger, the one Audrey pulled out of the water.

"'Pon my word, Laura, I never thought Audrey could look so well as she did tonight. A scraggy brown sort of flapper, wasn't she? Well, she seems to have grown up, all of a sudden, and looked quite the Countess.

"She was jolly decent to me too, but not so much so as Marjorie. We had a ripping evening, playing pyramids and pool to please the ladies. Not my usual style, but it was good enough tonight. What I really like is to see those two chaps, Gerard and Adair, left out in the cold, and all the girls round Mr. Alfred Baxter. He wasn't backward in coming forward either. Not a bit of it.

"This is a jolly little letter, isn't it? You've never had such a long one from me before. You

had better make the most of it, for you'll never get another. And I don't mind if you send it on to Monica.

"There's a meet here tomorrow, and Marjorie's going to follow on foot, as her horse is lame. They offered me a mount, but I know a trick worth two of that. A snug corner behind a hay-stack, and nobody looking, that's my programme.

"You'd better be saving up your pennies to buy a wedding present with, old girl. Won't the Spicer girls be sick about it? And Miss Fernie, and Daphne Donkin, and a few more.

"But I know the right sort, when I see it.

"Your aff. brother,

"ALF."

What Laura thought of the news must remain unrecorded, but poor Alf's departure the next day but one was not the triumphal procession he had planned, and on the intermediate evening, in the usual dressing-gown parliament, which was held in Marjorie's room, a few more confidences were exchanged.

Marjorie, looking extremely attractive in a pale blue dressing-gown, was brushing out her fair hair before the fire, while Audrey and Alison, comfortably established in two armchairs, were

cross-questioning her with skill and success, notwithstanding her attempts to turn the conversation.

"I *will* know what Alf said," remarked Alison firmly. "I told you you were much too civil last night. Poor little Alf, you completely turned his head. He looks absolutely flattened out today. He didn't make even one pun during dinner. You are a bit of a minx, for all your innocent looks, you know, Marjorie."

"I'm not," protested Marjorie, blushing, and brushing furiously. "I never dreamt of such a thing. I was thinking of — something quite different."

"Obviously," said Alison drily.

"And he really spoke quite nicely, poor little man," Marjorie continued. "He said of course he wouldn't have intruded if I had been still my lady, but, though it was his cousin who was the Countess now, it hadn't made any difference to his feelings.

"He told me what his income was, and all about his prospects, and said he hadn't been able to help noticing that I liked him."

"What did I tell you?" said Alison.

"But that vexed me," said Marjorie, "and I am afraid I stopped him rather sharply. So then

he got very humble, and — but really it is too bad of me — and he did say some very nice things, and I was awfully sorry for him, I really was."

"Until Robin Adair turned up under the next haystack," said Alison slily.

"Oh, Audrey," said Marjorie inconsequently, dropping her brush, and, crossing her arms on her friend's knee, she laid her fair head on them, as she knelt by her side. "I *am* so happy. I didn't know one could be so happy. It seems almost wicked when so many people aren't happy a bit. I want to spread it all over the world. I feel as if there was lots to spare. And it is all through you. Robin," the name was uttered very shyly, "said he would never have dared, and he was desperately jealous of Lord Framlingham. The idea!" and Marjorie picked up her brush again.

"Well, at any rate," said Alison, wickedly, "you have had two disinterested admirers. But I should say Robin will have his hands full, if you always mean to meet them under every haystack."

Audrey had not joined in the talk, but sat dreamily looking into the fire, a happy smile on her lips, and a great joy and peace in her heart.

"We'll be married on the same day, darling, won't we?" whispered Marjorie. "A year will soon pass. I'm quite an old lady compared to you, actually twenty-three, but I don't mind waiting, do you?"

And Audrey, out of her great happiness, breathed "No."

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